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September 5, 1882.

NO. 147. VOL. VI. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

The War of Hearts.

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AUTHOR OF "BLACK EYES AND BLUE," "BRAVE BARBARA," "HUNTED BRIDE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A GHOST AT THE WINDOW.

FIRELIGHT over everything in Farmer Fletcher's sitting room—over the ample hearth of old-fashioned, blue Dutch tiles—over the red-and-blue Turkey carpet—over the broad, white, unpapered walls, with their pictures of George and Martha Washington, and over the comfortably-low ceiling—over the two front windows, with their curtains undrawn—beyond them, over the deep, deep, spotless, shining snow outside, making it blush warmly as the brow of beauty

under the eye of love. Yet, though it flung its flattering radiance over everything in the great, homelike room, there were objects there upon which the coquettish firelight lingered with a rosier and more loving touch than upon others. It seemed, for instance, to wrap itself about the burnished pewter pitcher—full to the brim of spiced cider, on whose surface bobbed sundry roasted apples, seething in warmth and fragrance—which stood as near as safety would permit to the glittering brass and irons; and to caress the white cat and her two fluffy kittens who lay on the rug, basking in the luxury of heat.

It lighted up very becomingly the face, forehead, black, crispy hair and handsome features of the schoolmaster, who sat near the round mahogany table, with claw feet, which stood in the center of the room, supporting the tall lamp which "paled its ineffectual fires" in the face of that glowing heap of hickory logs in the fire-

place. It shone into the bright, honest eyes of one of his pupils, a boy of fourteen; it played hide-and-seek with Mrs. Fletcher's knitting-needles, and made two comical fire-balls of Farmer Fletcher's spectacles, as he read the paper. But most tenderly, most lovingly, this rosy light lingered on the lovely face and figure of Ruth, the daughter of the house. She, too, was a pupil of the schoolmaster, who, in his experience of "boarding round," had at length found himself, much to his secret delight, at the farmhouse toward which he had for some time cast a longing eye.

It is cold in Massachusetts in December, but it was not cold in this charming, old-fashioned sitting-room.

That dancing firelight kept everybody in a glow. At least, it must have been that which made Ruth's cheeks so red, as she bent over her slate, apparently deeply absorbed in an algebraic problem. Perhaps the teacher wondered



"MADEMOISELLE," SAID OTIS, RESPECTFULLY, "IS THERE ANYTHING WRONG? CAN I BE OF ANY ASSISTANCE?"

if she were going to be able to solve it without his help, for he kept those black eyes of his fixed on her face quite as steadily as hers were glued to the slate. But it was the firelight, of course, which made her seem to blush, and not the consciousness of his regard. It was known in school that the master was quite an artist—he drew wonderful portraits on the blackboard at times, to amuse himself during recess—and if he had been studying Ruth for the purpose of making a picture he could not have looked at her more earnestly. An exquisitely-pretty picture she would have made, with her graceful head inclined over her slate, the rosy light dancing over her gold-brown hair and glittering on the curved ends of long, dark lashes—over the delicate, dark brows, the young forehead white as snow, the flushed cheeks, and the dainty, scarcely-developed figure of a girl of sixteen.

Ruth had donned her merino dress with a lace ruffle and rose-colored bow at the neck, in honor of their boarder.

Besides this, she had a pink carnation and geranium-leaf in her hair, a gift from the schoolmaster, who had received a box of flowers from Boston the day previous—flowers were costly luxuries at Pentucket in December.

"Have you decided to go to Boston to spend the holidays, Mr. Otis?" asked Farmer Fletcher, laying down his paper.

The young man started, and a red streak rose slowly in either olive-pale cheek; he had been so absorbed in his study of the speaker's daughter—and in certain dark thoughts that lay restless but hidden in his breast—that the question came upon him like a surprise. Ruth looked up, interested in his answer, and so did her mother and David, her brother. They all liked the "schoolmaster," and had invited him to spend the time with them from the present until the day after New Year's. He had answered them, that morning at the breakfast-table, that he had business of some importance to transact in Boston, and did not know but he should be compelled to take the holidays for attending to it; but that inclination tempted him to accept their kind hospitality.

"I should like nothing so well as to remain here, in this delightful house, with your pleasant family," he had said, with great earnestness. "This is my first winter in the country; it has the charm of novelty; and I should like to keep Christmas in the old-fashioned way with you. But I fear I cannot."

He looked up now with a start and a flush as the question as to his decision was asked him. After a moment, forcing a laugh at his own nervous action, he replied:

"I find that I am obliged to go, Mr. Fletcher; I had a letter to-day which decided the matter. However, I have compromised with my conscience—I shall remain here, since you have so kindly urged me, until the day after Christmas. This arrangement will give me time to accomplish what I have to do in Boston."

"I dare say you will be glad to make New Year's calls on your fashionable city friends; of which, we understand, you have such numbers," remarked Ruth, with just the least perceptible flash of her beautiful eyes and pout of her rosy lips.

The schoolmaster looked at her an instant, but his eyes were cast down as he answered in a low voice:

"I shall not make a single call on that day. I am going on business—and disagreeable business, too."

"It's a wonder you condescend to teach school, Mr. Otis!" Ruth continued, with still more of a curl of her rose-leaf lips.

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Only, you have such an air—and they do say your relatives are all as rich as Croesus, and as proud as the Czar of all the Russias."

"Ruth!" spoke up her mother, reprovingly.

"Oh, I know, mother! You need not remind me that I am unladylike. It's bad enough to have Mr. Otis laugh at me." For the teacher had smiled in a grave, doubtful way which the imperious young beauty did not like. Ruth was the belle of her own neighborhood, and could have "her pick of beaux," yet could not prevent herself from becoming fascinated with this stranger, of whose opinion of herself she was so uncertain. Sometimes she thought he was in love with her; again, that he secretly scorned her, despised her family, and only flattered her for his own amusement.

It was this uncertainty which made Ruth Fletcher sometimes tremble and blush under his regard, as timid as a frightened dove; and at others peck angrily at the hand which would have caressed her. The schoolmaster was older

than the girl of sixteen, and very wise of his years; and perhaps he understood these little freaks of temper, and did laugh at her. He answered her now quite seriously:

"My relatives may have unbounded wealth; but my own store is so small that I must needs add to it. I will not beg—or, if I am compelled to, it will be of strangers and not of my own blood."

"But influential friends generally set young gentlemen up in business, and help them on," urged Ruth.

"My friends did set me up in business once; but I made a miserable failure. They were severe on me, and I quarreled with them, and since then I have left them to their bad opinion of me, if you must know the truth, Miss Fletcher."

"Oh!" murmured she, "I did not mean to be inquisitive, or—or, impudent, Mr. Otis. It is none of my business, I know; and I beg your pardon."

The soft violet eyes looked piteously into the gloomy ones of the teacher, who replied courteously, but who seemed to have been aroused to painful reminiscences by the turn the conversation had taken. A dark, stern look that was almost a scowl settled on his handsome face; he stared into the glowing fire as if he saw some frightful picture in the ruby coals that glimmered, flashed and crumbled under the burning fore-log. It was now Ruth's turn to watch his countenance, and to wonder what was in his mind, and to wish, with all her passionate, foolish heart, that she knew more about his past life. The farmer, yawning, bade David pass around the cider, after which he and "mother" went off to bed, with an injunction to "the children" to follow speedily—a mandate which David, sleepy with some study and more coasting, soon obeyed; but Ruth still sat by the round-table, her wistful eyes following the teacher, who, oblivious of her existence, now paced up and down the length of the fire-lighted room—his head drooped upon his breast, his whole expression indicating deep and painful thought. At intervals he would pause by the uncurtained window and gaze out on the fire-litten snow, which looked as if stained with blood.

Nearly an hour passed in this way, when he approached the table and seemed about drawing something from his breast-pocket, but started on perceiving Ruth, exclaiming, almost harshly:

"What! you here still?"

The tears had been standing in the poor girl's eyes for a long time. They now rolled down her cheeks at being addressed so curtly, and rising she would have fled from the room; but the sight of those glistening drops recalled her companion to a sense of his rudeness, and stretching out his hand he drew her back, kissed her gently on the forehead and then pushed her from him, but with a soft firmness which she could not choose but obey.

Ruth, at the door, paused and turned as if asking to be recalled; but he had again forgotten her existence, and with a heavy sigh she went away.

If the sigh which the girl breathed was a sad one that which broke laboringly from the breast of the man she left, when he found himself alone, was more like a moan than a sigh. The gasp of the night-wind, shuddering at the casement, was not so dreary.

Oh, that lonesome, wintry night-wind! It had stolen out of the far darkness and now moaned at the fire-litten window as if pleading to be let in.

To the conscience of the man who stood there, trembling and listening, it seemed to be *her* voice, begging and pleading to be taken to his heart.

Her voice—the writer of the letter which he now drew from his bosom, and, unfolding, held its delicate characters to the light of the lamp.

For the huge fire had by this time smoldered down to a red core of heat, whose cheerful glow in vain strove to combat the shadows which filled the further limits of the room. Those sleepless shadows crept closer and closer about him, from every side, as he stood by the dimming lamp, reading and re-reading—as one who sees without comprehending—the lines traced on the violet-scented paper:

"I have found out where you are, Otis, as you will see by the direction of this. I am far from well this winter; indeed, I am telling you the truth. I feel that I cannot live long—at least, if you treat me as you have been doing. I wish you would come and see me. Ah, for God's sake come and see me, dear Otis. I am so lonely, now mother is dead. Come and see me *just once*. Oh, come, and let your poor unhappy little wife again hear you speak,

see you smile, or even frown. Yes, if you come only to curse me, I still pray you to come. You cannot think how dreadful it is to be alone as I am. I lie awake all night thinking of you. I know that you hate and despise me. I am not wholly to blame. Yet, if I had it in my power, I would undo everything—not for my sake, but for yours, dear Otis. Yes, if I could go back one miserable year I would do it."

"Otis, Otis, have mercy on me, and come, if only once, if only for an hour."

"Your poor little wife, MILDRED."

And while Ruth Fletcher, the innocent school girl, wept herself to sleep on her pillow, because Mr. Otis had been so indifferent to her that evening, the teacher stood alone in the darkening room, surrounded by shadows which chilled his very blood, while the running night-wind, as it passed, snatched at the rattling window, shaking it, and wailing out: "Come, come, come! If only for an hour, for God's sake, come!"

Oh, the terrible sting of the adder, Conscience! You may drowsie it for a day, but it will start to life, and pierce your soul with mortal pangs, in the very midst of joy and fancied security.

That night it struck its fangs into the hardening heart of Otis Garner.

CHAPTER II.

A WAGER LOST AND PAID.

ONCE upon a time, in one of the elegant rooms of a certain young men's club of Boston, four young gentlemen sat at a card-table playing whist. The game itself was respectable enough: the parties playing it belonged to the *creme de la creme* of fashionable society. The only serious misfortune which had, thus far, befallen any one of this distinguished quartette was the very sad misfortune of having too much money to spend. Not having so much self denial as money, they constantly made foolish use of the latter. They were doing so now. For, on another table within reach, stood several bottles of champagne, to which they had frequent recourse as the game progressed. The effect of this lavish supply of champagne was to make them very merry. And if we are to judge by a conversation which took place amongst them about eleven o'clock P. M., it made them as foolish as it did "jolly." In it they agreed to play a last game, and the losing partners were solemnly pledged, on their word of honor, to toss up for the lot, and whichever one of the two lost, was pledged to start from the steps of the Tremont House as the bell struck twelve on the morrow noon, and walking slowly toward the Common, offer himself to the first young woman he met, and marry her if she accepted him.

Such a wager as this was highly exciting, provoking hilarity as the game progressed; and when, at the close, Otis Garner found himself not only a loser of the game, but the owner of the gold eagle which came down "heads, I lose," he burst into a roar of laughter, professing himself not only willing but eager to keep his promise.

All that he demanded of his gay friends was, that they should not betray the "lark" until after the walk was taken, as he did not wish his acquaintances to crowd the pavement in front of the Tremont, nor follow him, while he was fulfilling the wager. They promised to keep the secret, and the four separated at two in the morning, in glorious good spirits, feeling that they had originated an idea which ought to make them immortal.

But when Otis Garner woke up in his luxurious chamber in his uncle's house at ten the following morning, he was not so certain that he had done the brightest thing that ever was.

His uncle, he was quite sure, would not admire the idea. Otis was unpleasantly dependent on this uncle. His own parents were dead, and the few thousands of dollars they had been able to leave him—his father having lost nearly all his fortune in stock speculations shortly before he died—were spent long ago. But his uncle Garner was a childless widower, and he was the same as an adopted son to the old gentleman; so that Otis never troubled himself about his prospects. It is not strange that he rested secure as the heir of his uncle's millions; for he was petted and humored like an only child.

Every one flattered and indulged Otis Garner. His beauty, his gallant ways, his high spirits, excused those little extravagances—even those dissipations—which his friends believed he would outgrow all in good time.

His uncle Garner had another pet—not so dear to his heart and his pride as the young man, but well-loved and cared for nevertheless. Honoria Appleton was a superb girl, beautiful and haughty as if of imperial blood, with the same dark, glowing style of beauty which distinguished her cousin Otis. She, too, lived in her

uncle's house and was his ward. At seventeen she had the composure and the stateliness of a woman of twenty; while the regal lily on its swaying stem was not more graceful.

Naturally enough, the elder Garner thought that a marriage of the two cousins would be the nicest thing in the world; for thus, without robbing Honoria, he could leave all his vast fortune to his favorite—his *boy*; indulging both his affection for Otis and his pride in the great estate, which could thus be kept intact.

Quite as naturally Honoria did not intend to fall in love with her cousin. The mere fact that their guardian looked forward to such a thing set her against it. Her cousin, to her, was her cousin—and nothing more.

There had been times when *he* had felt himself wildly infatuated with *her*; but these times, so far, had been followed by periods of resentment and coldness, during which he took the opportunity of falling in love with countless other girls, worthy and unworthy.

Thus affairs stood on that bright October morning when Otis roused himself from his deep slumbers to realize that his head was aching from too much champagne, and that he had made a “confounded fool of himself” the previous night. The thought of his wager filled him with horror; but he was not the one to back out from any pledge given to his companions:—if it had been to drown himself in the Charles river, he would deliberately have drowned himself.

He was glad to reflect that it was ten o'clock and that his uncle had probably left the house. He was not only dismayed about the wager, but ashamed of the late hours he had kept. As yet, it was seldom that Otis, though gay, idle, and inclined to dissipation, actually went beyond the prescribed bounds.

Ringing the bell for Stickler, his uncle's valet, he ordered a glass of soda-water, and his breakfast to be brought to his room.

“My uncle has gone out?” he said, inquiringly, as he sat down in his dressing-gown to the epicurean breakfast deftly arranged on a small table by the *valet*.

“No, Mr. Otis, he is in the library, if you please. And he told me, would I tell you he was waiting to see you, as soon as convenient, please.”

This news quite spoiled the young gentleman's appetite, which had been poor enough at first; he knew only too well that he was to have a lecture from his kind old relative on his late hours; so, hastily drinking a cup of strong coffee to tone up his nerves, he proceeded to make a careful toilet, mindful, in the midst of his trouble, of the wager he was to fulfill at noon.

“How the dickens, Stickler, did my uncle find out that I was not at Miss Agnew's reception last night?” he asked, as the man was helping him with his things.

“Oh, indeed, Mr. Otis, I'm sorry to say it, an' I 'ope you'll excuse me, but them young gentlemen as 'elped you 'ome, sir, they rung the bell that long and that loud as I couldn't stop 'em, though I opened the door at the first sound—being on the watch like to let you in quiet, Mr. Otis—and they yelled up the staircase that foolish, your uncle ran out, thinking somethink dreadful was up, an' they made a chair of their four 'ands an' carried you up an' stood you against the wall, an' made a redeklous bow to my master, an' says: ‘We've brought him 'ome all right. Don't let him fall over, or he'll break.’ An' one of 'em fell himself, going down, and the whole 'ouse aroused by the row. Indeed, I tried for to prevent it, Mr. Otis. It's a burning shame your uncle should be allowed to know—but them gentlemen was too imprudent for anythink. I 'ope you don't think it my fault, sir.”

“No, indeed, Stickler; it certainly was not your fault. I shall remember your faithfulness when I have worn this coat once or twice more,” and Otis tried to laugh; but the crimson flush of shame rushed over his olive cheek, to know that his foolish excesses of the previous evening had been thus rudely betrayed to the refined and sensitive old man who loved him so, and whose heart must ache at his nephew's folly.

“It is the last time that I ever touch champagne,” he said to himself, as he went slowly down the stairs up which he had been carried in such disgraceful plight.

It was with blushing brow and downcast eyes that he stood before the grave old gentleman in the library; for Otis, though spoiled by indulgence, was neither heartless nor hardened. Love for the culprit softened the uncle's indignation; but he managed to deliver a pretty serious lecture, and to exact from the erring one a solemn promise of reform, which was meant, at the time, to be kept.

Otis Garner was in no enviable frame of mind when, at a quarter past eleven, he was dismissed from the library. He saw how wild, reckless and ruinous were such frolics as that just over; he earnestly resolved never to go so far in another, but to limit himself to sensible pleasures; but all these regrets and resolutions did not absolve him from the consequences of the one just indulged in. He never, for a moment, admitted to himself the possibility of evading the wager. Should he do so he knew that he would become an object of ridicule to his associates at the Club. “No! mad as he had been to enter into such a compact, once being made, he would keep it, ‘if it killed him.’” His uncle's just anger, Honoria's contempt and his own life-long misery, were as nothing weighed against his word, given to his comrades. It is true that he might crawl out through the loop-hole of a drunken man's word being worthless; but Otis' pride was strong and fiery—he was a gentleman, drunk on champagne, and he must abide the consequences of his own imprudence.

He walked quickly out of the stately and splendid old mansion which faced on the Common—just bowing to Honoria, who was passing through the hall with her fair, patrician hands full of roses and violets which she had gathered from the conservatory, and who never had looked lovelier than now, in her long, white, sweeping morning-dress, a cluster of scarlet fuchsias in her dark hair and the freshness and brightness of morning on velvet cheeks and sparkling eyes—and in a few moments had reached the steps of the hotel, where, as he expected, he found his three friends awaiting him. These had forced a reckless gayety by renewing their appeals to the treacherous friendship of the wine; they welcomed the victim with a satirical rapture, which goaded him into a still firmer resolve to fulfill his part of the compact.

In the midst of their mock congratulations the bells of the city began to toll twelve.

Otis was conscious that he turned pale.

His friends saw it, too, and irritated him by their heartless laughter.

White and frowning, with his dark eyes burning and his lips compressed, he began the fatal promenade.

His three comrades followed, a few paces in the rear, to see “fair play,” as they expressed it.

Otis Garner, as he walked slowly and gracefully through the crowd, was a man to make even those of his own sex look after him. Young, beautiful, faultless in dress and carriage, the rose-bud and pansy in his button-hole just giving the finishing touch of living, breathing romance to youth and grace, he walked deliberately on, scanning the faces of all he met. Of course, at that hour, on that street, he could not walk far without meeting women in plenty. Still, it so chanced, that he had proceeded some distance before he met one of the other sex whom he judged to be under twenty.

Suddenly he stopped in his leisurely walk.

His three friends passed him slowly, so as not to attract too much attention by their and his maneuvers.

A young girl, coming from the opposite direction, had also stopped on the pavement the instant Otis did. She looked about her as if she had lost something.

“Mademoiselle,” said Otis, respectfully, “is there anything wrong? Can I be of any assistance?”

The large, lovely, innocent eyes filled with tears, as she glanced up at him.

“Oh, sir, some one has taken my purse. I had it five minutes ago, I am certain now; it is, gone!”

Her tone was one of perfect despair. The look of distress deepened over her young face.

“Sixteen—pretty—and poor,” was the verdict of the three young gentlemen who sauntered by at this crisis.

“Allow me to aid you in searching for it,” said Otis.

“Oh, sir, what good would it do? I have not dropped it—it has been stolen,” and the tears began to fall.

“Was there much in it?” asked the loser of the wager, biting his lips as he met the curious glances of his confederates.

“All we had in the world. Oh, what will mother say? It would not be much to you, sir, I know—only fifteen dollars—but it took me so long to earn it—oh, so long! I am a music-teacher, sir,” she added, innocently, betrayed into confidence by the sympathy expressed in the stranger's face.

“You! I thought you a child!”

“Well, it is true I am only a little over sixteen. But I had to do something, after papa died. I have but one pupil, sir—a little girl—

and this was the very first money I ever earned. Only think of it!” and the large tears began to roll more rapidly down her peach-blossom cheeks.

Otis looked very earnestly at her. He dress was old-fashioned and poor; but it was of dark material and fitted her slender figure so well that not one *man* in a thousand would have noticed its plainness; for the figure itself was that of a fairy and gave grace to the garment. Sweet little hands. Dear little feet—in shabby shoes. From under a straw hat fell a cascade of glittering, rippling hair that glimmered like water made golden in the sunlight. This lovely hair framed a small, sweet face, very pure and childlike in its expression; yet with a wistful earnestness very winning. Her complexion was like that of snow-drops and pinks. It was pitiable to see the heavy tears hang on those long curved eyelashes.

“Thank the Fates, it is no worse,” muttered Otis between his clenched teeth. “It may ruin me; but, at least, I can do something toward making this child happy.”

At this moment his friends re-passed him, smiling mockingly. He glared at them like a savage.

“They had better remember this girl is to be my wife!” he thought; “I will horsewhip Philips for that insolent look.”

“Will you accept fifteen dollars from me?” he asked her, pulling out his pocket-book.

“Oh, no, sir; I could not do that!”

“What is your name?”

“Mildred Lovelace.”

“Well, then, Mildred, since you will not take the money, will you take me?”

She opened her blue eyes wide.

“I will tell you the whole truth, Mildred. I promised those three young gentlemen who just passed that I would ask the first girl I met, after leaving the Tremont House, to marry me. It was foolish, for I might have met an ugly girl, or a bad one. You are pretty and good. So I consider myself very fortunate. I will tell you who I am. I am Otis Garner, nephew of C. W. Garner, the rich, retired merchant. Now, I seriously ask you to marry me. Will you, or will you not, be my little wife, this very day?”

CHAPTER III.

SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES.

If little Mildred had been less of a child her answer would have been different. She looked up at this splendid fairy prince who had offered himself to her. The world—which, a moment ago, when she was bewailing her lost purse, looked so dark and cold and hungry to her—now glittered with jewels and breathed of roses, and shone as full of magic wonders as the mysterious Christmas-tree to the imagination of a child. Oh, could it be true? To have this beautiful, perfect creature, to love and pet her—to be the wife of such an angel—to be rich, and wear diamonds and have silken robes, and never give those tiresome music lessons? The thought took away her breath. The blue eyes began to shine and expand, the rosy little mouth to curl into a soft, shy smile. She looked up into Otis Garner's grave eyes trustfully:

“If you are in real earnest, I will be your wife, gladly, sir,” she answered him, blushing and smiling.

“To-day?”

“That must be for you to say, Mr. Garner. You will come home with me and ask my mother, will you not?”

“I must have her consent in order to get the license, I suppose,” he replied; and then the haughty scion of one of Boston's proudest families, offered his arm to the little creature in the delaine dress and black straw hat, and led her, with an air of triumph, past the grinning trio who had come to a stand not far away.

“Meet me at the Church of the Ascension at five this afternoon,” he said, gayly, looking back as he marched by them, with little Mildred clinging to his arm.

“It's a dooced good joke,” murmured one of the three, when Garner was out of hearing. “The best—the very best—joke I ever heard of. By Jove, but Garner has grit! He will marry her, as sure as you live! The old man will cut him out of his inheritance, and there will be the mischief to pay all around. It all comes of Otis' dooced stubbornness. I thought nothing but that he would back down. Well, boys, we must see the play out. Five o'clock! By all that's jolly it's a killing joke. Will be on hand, of course?”

“Of course. And all I can say is that I hope he will not murder her after he's married her. He's got a devil of a temper, if it once gets up. He'll marry her, rather than back out of a bad

scrape; but what he'll do afterward remains to be seen. I would not care to be in her shoes."

"I've a mind to go after him and tell him we release him from the bond," added the third: but such a course was approved too late. Garner had disappeared in the crowd, nor did they succeed in seeing him again before five o'clock, although, growing remorseful, they called at his residence twice in the course of the afternoon.

At the appointed hour these frolic-loving friends entered the designated church, with perhaps a dozen others, to show they had confided the story of the "fun" that was going on. The altar was decorated with flowers, the organist was playing Wagner's Bridal March, and just after they were seated, there floated up the aisle on the arm of handsome and haughty Otis Garner, a fairy figure, clad in clouds of snowy satin and lace, her exquisite face blooming in the soft shadow of the wedding vail like some delicate flower over which has been woven, while it dreamed, a dewy film.

There was no mark of "the lower classes" on this dainty bride to horrify the fashionable snobs who looked on, half in mockery, half in dismay. She was fresh and lovely and delicate in looks—but whether she could ever be a fit mate to the man who stood by her side was another question.

The wildest of them grew grave as the solemn words of the marriage ceremony were spoken; the three friends, especially, felt the sting of regret, realizing keenly the folly of their ways, and perhaps mentally resolving that they never again would have a hand in such a scrape.

But the deed was done!

Otis Garner had kept his tipsy pledge, and was walking out of the church with the air of a king, but pale as death; vouchsafing no glance at his club companions, but proudly supporting the blanched and trembling young creature who clung to his arm, and whom he had taken, before God and man, as his wife.

The bride's mother, a plainly-dressed woman, evidently very much of an invalid, and who had a sad, gentle countenance, walked meekly behind. On reaching the pavement the three entered a carriage in waiting and were driven rapidly away.

In less than an hour thereafter Otis entered his uncle's house, and sat down to the sumptuous six o'clock dinner as if nothing had occurred. He was pale and silent; but this both Mr. Garner and Honoria set down to the reproof he had received in the morning. It flattered and pleased the uncle to think that the weight of his rebuke was felt so sincerely; it touched him to see the young man grave and *distract*; and out of the kindness of his indulgent affection, he made an effort to rally him out of his unwonted seriousness.

"You must escort Honoria to the opera to-night, Otis. It is a gala-night, I believe—Nilsson in Marguerite. You have no other engagements, I presume?"

"None, uncle Garner. I will take Honoria if she cares to go."

"I do care to go," said Honoria. "I adore Nilsson in Marguerite," with the enthusiasm of seventeen.

Otis looked over at his cousin earnestly.

Oh, how beautiful she was! He had been madly in love with her many times; but never—never so infatuated as at this moment! The contrast between this royal beauty and that of the uncultivated little creature to whom he had said good-by for the day, a little while ago—leaving her, with a cold kiss, weeping in her mother's arms—enhanced every charm of the former. He thought of the sweet, silly, ignorant little thing with mingled pity and—disgust. Her fawn-like manners, her unconventional ways, her simple loveliness, were hateful to him in contrast with Honoria's superb style.

To make matters worse, Honoria was in one of her coquettish moods. She glanced from under her dark lashes at Otis with a smile which fired his soul.

The maddening thought rushed through his brain that perhaps, after all, his cousin, who had taken delight in showing her indifference, had begun to care for him. Now that he had put it out of his power to ever again make love to her, it seemed to him there was nothing in the world worth doing but that.

Honoria was still in the mood to please her cousin when she came down, dressed for the opera. She had made herself as beautiful as an exquisite toilet and sparkling spirits could make her. There was a soft glow on her velvet cheeks and in her dark eyes. Her manner was gay and yet tender.

What man can resist the spell of this combination?

Otis felt his heart melt under her lightest glance or word.

He did not take an inventory of what she wore—Honoria had the great art to make anything she wore seem a part of her. Her taste was infallible. He only knew that he was proud of his fair companion—of her elegant dress and her splendid beauty.

Strange thoughts and dreams coursed through his brain as they sat in their box at the opera that evening.

The thrilling, passionate voice of the ill-fated Marguerite stirred the inmost depths of his being. It seemed to him that she was Mildred, and that he was the Faust who had broken her heart; but that he would still—though lashed and driven by all the devils of remorse and despair—still thrust her aside and laugh at her madness, for the sake of winning the love of the glorious girl by his side, the light touch of whose perfumed glove hastened his pulses and the soft fire of whose lustrous eyes burned down to his heart's core.

Once, during the scene in the prison cell, two tears dropped from Honoria's diamond eyes, and fell glittering on the lace and pearl of her fan. Instantly Otis caught the fan and kissed the briny drops. Honoria smiled and lightly blushed—she had never before given him such encouragement. For a moment Otis was in raptures; from these he sunk into dull despair, remembering what had occurred that eventful day.

Honoria Appleton was no flirt; she was incapable of anything so degrading as an actual flirtation.

She was acting, to-night, from a high and holy purpose. She had been grieved and alarmed at the condition in which her cousin had come home the previous night. It was true that such "sprees" as this were of rare—very rare—occurrence; but, she argued justly, they should never occur at all. She knew the good and manly qualities of her cousin; she feared the influence of too-gay associates, and she had formed a resolution, that day, to treat him with such kindness and consideration as would give her the power, some time, to persuade him to swear off from his fashionable club and its excesses. Whether she should go further than that—encourage his liking for her—she had not decided. Certainly, the very interest she took in his improvement made her think of him more tenderly.

So she smiled on him that night; and was sweetness and goodness itself to him the next day, and the next, and the next—knowing no reason why she should not—and happy in the fact that he now remained home of evenings so satisfied with her society that he did not crave the coarser pleasures of the club. Yet his conduct puzzled her. One moment he would be sunk in gloom, for which there seemed no excuse; the next he would bewilder her with a display of extravagant gayety.

One evening they were alone together in the music-room. Several visitors had been in and gone away. Uncle Garner had retired to his room; it was late. Honoria had been playing and singing for Otis for the last half-hour. With his elbows leaning on the piano and his strange, fiery, somber eyes fixed on her face, he had listened until she grew weary and ceased. The house was so still that the ticking of the quaint, old clock on the staircase echoed down into the quiet room.

Honoria looked up, half-uneasily, at her companion. They were such good friends, and knew each other so well, dwelling as they did under the same roof, that she was puzzled by the new expression of his face. He approached a step nearer to her, took her hands and drew her to her feet, still holding her hands in a grasp so fierce that it hurt her.

"Honoria, could you love a man well enough to forgive him for doing a dastardly deed?—well enough to *love* him still, despite of his succumbing to a terrible temptation?"

"I don't know. What are you talking about?" she answered him, startled, and partially shrinking from him.

"Some time—soon—you will hear a strange story about me. Then I shall come to you and ask you what to do. It shall depend on you whether I go hang myself, or whether there may still be something in life for me to look forward to. Honoria, whatever happens, remember, I love you—never loved, and *never will* love any woman but yourself."

Before she could answer him he flung her hands away, and walked out of the room. She heard his listless step slowly ascending the stairs. She was frightened. What terrible thing could her cousin have been guilty of?

She lay long awake that night, wondering and fearing.

The next day, like a bomb-shell, into that aristocratic house fell the news of the nephew's ill-assorted marriage. The whole city had been ringing with the story for days, but no one had ventured to speak of it to the haughty old gentleman. At last, a version of the affair got into the papers, and this falling under the eye of Mr. Garner at his reading-room brought him home rather suddenly.

Honoria and Otis were together in the back drawing-room. He was holding the skein of silk which she was winding.

Their uncle swept into the room like a winter-storm, and thrust the paper with the marked paragraph before the eyes of the guilty young man.

"What foundation is there for this story, sir?"

Otis glanced it over; his face paled, but he raised his eyes bravely to the countenance, black with wrath and quivering with pain, which frowned down upon him.

"It is almost entirely true, uncle."

"True!"

"The night I came home in that disgraceful condition, uncle, while under the influence of champagne, we fellows made a wager, and the one that lost was to marry the first girl he met, the next day, starting from the steps of the Tremont, just as it is stated here. I was so unfortunate as to lose—and I had to keep my word."

"And you married the girl?"

"I did."

"The marriage was legally performed?"

"Yes, uncle—at the Church of the Ascension."

"She is poor?"

"A music-teacher, she told me."

"And vulgar?"

"Not very."

"Leave my house, sir, and never enter it again!"

"Yes, uncle."

"You are disinherited—mark that! I here register a solemn oath that I will not leave you so much as one dollar. My will shall be re-written to-morrow. My niece shall take your place in my heart, and as my heiress."

"All right. God bless you, uncle. I'm sorry my folly has grieved you and wounded the Garner pride. Good-by, Honoria."

Otis shook hands with his cousin—who was white and shivering, and whose tearful eyes met his with a look that maddened him—turned and went out.

CHAPTER IV.

A REJECTED APPEAL.

"SHE loves me!—her eyes betrayed it!" he murmured, with a fierce joy, as he hurried down the steps.

For an hour he walked up one street and down another, in a most distracted way. From the first he had anticipated such an ending to this miserable business—yet, when the expected blow fell, he was stunned.

At the end of an hour he called a carriage and was driven to the humble home of the young stranger whose fate was so inextricably blended with his own.

I say "stranger," for the acquaintance of this rashly-wedded pair had progressed but slowly since they had left the altar before which they had been pronounced "man and wife." A brief call of fifteen minutes each afternoon, during which he always saw his bride in the presence of her mother, had been the utmost limit of the bridegroom's attentions. He had intimated to Mrs. Lovelace that some cultivation of each other's society and friendship would be desirable for both, before they began to live together. The mother gladly acquiesced—since, although her desire to secure a rich husband for her child before she herself should be taken away from this life had induced her to consent to the sudden marriage, she had felt the want of delicacy in such a proceeding.

She was more than pleased with the refined consideration of her new son-in-law; as yet seeing little reason to complain, since he never came without bringing rich presents to herself and her daughter. New furniture came to replace the few shabby articles remaining of their store: delicacies, suited to an invalid's appetite; fine dresses for herself; and for her darling child jewels, laces, fans, perfumery, bijouterie, and a whole outfit of handsome garments, bonnets, wraps, dainty robes. The

bride had a new purse, filled with gold and bank-notes, in place of the poor little affair she had lost.

Every day, after their fine luncheon, little Mildred dressed herself in her new finery and sat down by the window to watch and wait for her fairy prince.

She was as pretty as possible, with her soft gold-brown hair piled up on her head to make her appear taller and more like a wife—her silken dress falling about her fairy figure, her white neck encircled with pearls or costly-cut pink corals, and the wedding-ring shining on the slender finger of the dimpled hand which rested on the window-sill.

At first Mildred had gone to meet her prince with the eagerness of a child who expects new toys; but a change was coming over her manner very rapidly.

Before her strange marriage Mildred had been simply a child; but womanly feelings develop wonderfully under "the light of a dark eye" shining upon the unopened buds which have heretofore lain so closely curled. The rose of love was forced into sudden bloom in her heart. Its sweet perfume stole through her being, thrilling her veins with life and joy; but also, this rose, so sweet, so intoxicating in its delicious fragrance, was set about with cruel thorns.

Dreaming over her peculiar position, day and night, Mildred was not such a child but that she perceived its embarrassments and dangers; her sole hope, her sole wish—the one wild cry of her young heart—was, that her prince might learn to love her as she already loved him.

Was it possible? Was there even the shadow of a hope that it might come to pass?

She sat by the window looking for him, and when he came and she rose to meet him, there was a smile on her lip, but she was pale as death. He gave her the customary light kiss on her forehead, and led her back to her chair.

"You are pale, little Mildred," he said, after bowing to the mother.

"Pale, Mr. Garner?" and then, indeed, she blushed rosy red, all over the sweet brow and fair throat. "I am very well indeed. But you are not well, sir. You are pale, I am sure," and the little hand with the wedding-ring on it crept timidly toward his, shrinking back again, however, before she touched him.

"I have had a shock," he said, laughing lightly. "I did not suppose it had changed my complexion, though."

She looked at him wistfully—would he tell her? She longed to know what had troubled him; but she would not venture the liberty of asking him.

"My uncle has disinherited me and driven me out of his house with orders not to step my foot in it again. So now, little Mildred, I am as poor as you are!"

A flash of light illuminated the child-wife's face; her color came and went; her lips parted; her great violet eyes shone on his with sudden splendor for a moment and then fell, modestly, before his look.

Surely, now that he was poor and had no home, he would come to *them*—to her and her mother! How gladly she would dispose of the jewels and silks he had given her, so as to gain a little money to make this poor home more comfortable for him! Yes, she would willingly take up again the tedious music-lessons, for his sake! How earnestly she would try to make him forget his troubles! Oh, if she knew some better way to make money, so that she could occasionally surprise him with some of his accustomed luxuries! Thus the thoughts of the poor little simple thing leaped forward, painting their future.

She was aroused from these delicious plans by the cold, unsteady tones of her mother's voice.

"Had your sudden marriage anything to do with your uncle's action, Mr. Garner?"

"Everything, my dear madam. You see, he had other views for me—had another bride, in fact, selected. It is natural that he should be disappointed and offended."

"What do you propose to do?"

"There you have me, madame. I have not had time to decide upon my future as yet; it is scarcely an hour since my haughty relative gave me permission to forget his existence."

"Perhaps he will repent and recall you."

"I do not happen to be made of the stuff that is subject to recalls. When a man kicks me out of his house, I am not a dog, to be coaxed back again."

"But you must consider his feelings, Mr. Garner. Supposing you do *not* make up with your uncle, however: do you mean to say that you have absolutely nothing of your own?"

"I have my hands and my head, but neither of these are accustomed to making themselves useful. Still, not to discourage you too much, Mrs. Lovelace, I will say that I have at least a thousand dollars' worth of knick-knacks bought with money left me by my father; that I will dispose of these as soon as possible, and give to you, for your daughter's use, every penny which they bring. After that is done, I will consider further."

"I do not want your money," spoke up little Mildred, with trembling lips; "I will not take it, Mr. Garner; you need it more than I do. Do you suppose I would touch it?" indignantly.

He smiled at her affectionately, laying his hand lightly on her soft, gold-threaded hair for an instant.

"You *must* take it, little Mildred," he said, half-reprovingly. "It is my business and my right to provide for you. I want to make you and your mother as comfortable as I can before I go away."

"Go away?"—this from Mrs. Lovelace.

"Yes, madame. Boston is not the place for me to begin making my living, under the circumstances. I shall do better in some other place. It hurts a fellow's pride, you understand, to have the cold shoulder thrust under his nose. I shall leave the city as soon as I can wind up my small affairs. Mildred, good-by for to-day. I will see you to-morrow as usual."

Mildred arose from her chair and made him a stately bow. She did not seem to see the hand he held out; while so proudly did she hold her graceful little head, she seemed to him to have grown inches taller in a moment. Her soft eyes flashed, her lip curled, her cheek was white as winter's snow. Otis Garner felt, as he left her presence, as if some queen had just dismissed him in disgrace.

He flattered himself that he understood "the girls."

Truly, he had flirted with enough of them! But he did not understand this one—for he mistook the cause of her displeasure.

"She's a mercenary little wretch!" he said, to himself, as he walked away. "By Venus! I did not think *she* would be the first to show me how I had fallen! Upon my word, her little beggarishness was quite grand! It's a wonder she did not tell me not to call again. Perhaps she will cut me entirely by to-morrow! I must take her a present. And, by-the-by, I must attend to that little business of raising some money for her. I can't leave them penniless—she and her mother:

"I'm married to a wife, my boys,
And that by Jove's no joke!
I've ate the white of this world's egg,
And now must eat the yolk."

sings Bailey, and he's about right. Let me see! Uncle gave me the yacht and the pair of blacks—they are now his property again; I won't raise money on *them*. But the bay trotter I bought with my own private funds. He is good for eight hundred at this time of the year—worth two thousand easily, when you don't want to sell. I can't spare my watch; but I have a lot of expensive trash: my diamond sleeve-buttons cost me three hundred—good for half that, I suppose. My onyx cameos are worth about as much. My sphinx-head buttons cost something—why, yes, my sleeve-buttons alone, come to think, are a nice little collection worth a thousand dollars at forced sale. Think of providing for a wife on

the strength of one's sleeve-buttons!" Otis laughed so gayly at the idea that a stranger, passing him, looked back at the happy young man with wonder and envy.

It was three days before Otis Garner called again on his girl-wife. When he did appear, it was to say good-by.

"I go to New York on the evening train," he said.

His face was somber, its healthy, olive glow blanched to a sickly brown; his words were abrupt; he was evidently in a hurry. But he took Mrs. Lovelace aside and gave her a bank-book, telling her that he had deposited fifteen hundred dollars to the credit of Mrs. Mildred Garner, which sum she was to draw upon as she needed it.

"You have not left yourself penniless?" the mother had the grace to inquire. She was bitterly disappointed at the way matters were turning out, much on account of the loss of wealth and grandeur of station to her darling daughter, and more because she feared her rash approval of the hasty marriage was doomed to blight that daughter's happiness.

"No—I have five hundred dollars in my pocket."

"Well, you have been very liberal, I am sure—under the circumstances. We thank you."

Otis bowed and turned to Mildred who stood in the center of the room, still and white as a statue.

He had not forgotten her demeanor at his last visit. Believing her selfish and calculating, he was glad of it, as an excuse to himself for treating her as he intended to do. He did not know of the pangs which that proud look covered—pangs of wounded love, of cruel mortification at his indifference.

Now he took her little cold hand calmly and proceeded to say the last few words in a voice destitute of the least emotion. Mildred looked up pleadingly into the dark eyes, so beautiful and so cold to her; her sweet mouth blanched and trembled—oh, how pretty and how pitiable she looked!

The young man began to grow uneasy under those asking eyes. He wished "the dooced, embarrassing interview" well over.

"You will write to me, Mr. Garner?"

"Write? Oh, certainly—that is, I suppose so—of course, occasionally. But I expect to be in business and not have much time to myself."

"Just a few little lines, now and then, that I may know how you prosper."

"Well, of course. And now, good-by, little Mildred. Take good care of her, Mrs. Lovelace, will you?"

Mildred clung to the hand he held out to her. She gasped out, with dry lips, those loving, piteous eyes fixed on his:

"Take me with you, Mr. Garner!"

"I cannot," he answered, abruptly, astonished and alarmed. "I have nothing on which to keep a wife; it would be folly—madness! Remain here with your good mother. She will take better care of you than I could."

"That is true," said Mildred, slowly. "And I could not leave dear, sick mamma, after all. You are right, Mr. Garner."

Pride was again struggling for mastery over love, which had broken all bounds, even of girlish timidity, when she made that passionate appeal. Her eyes fell, her cold little hand relaxed its hold; she stood mute.

"Perhaps some day it will be different," Otis said, more tenderly, pitying the frail little creature who drooped before him. "If I ever get rich I will come for you—for you are my wife, you know, strange as it seems."

"Yes, I know."

"If you get weary of waiting before I have made that fortune the law gives you release, you know, Mildred. A few years of 'willful desertion' on my part will free you. Perhaps that would be the greatest kindness I could do you."

No response.

"Well, farewell, little Mildred."

"Good-by, Mr. Garner."

He lifted her hand to his lips, bowed to her mother, and hurried out, glad to get away from a "scene," into the open air.

Little Mildred stood where he left her until the last echo of his foot on the pavement died away—then she sank slowly, slowly down, and would have fallen had not her mother caught her in her feeble arms and sunk down with her, pillowing the pale white-rose cheek in her lap, and gazing with anguish and remorse at the closed eyes—closed in merciful unconsciousness to the weary truth that this is a hard world for the poor and unprotected.

CHAPTER V.

A CRUEL MISTAKE.

RUTH FLETCHER arose very early on Christmas morning. It was yet a full hour to daylight. She ran to the window in her night-gown, parted the dimity curtains and looked out, gazing a moment at the glorious "Star of the East," blazing transcendent over the dark brown of the wooded hills. Old Speckle-back, in the barn-yard, was crowing lustily, as if saying, "Merry—merry—mer-ry Christmas to all!"

"A merry Christmas to you, too, old Speckle-back," whispered Ruth; and then, shivering—for it was very cold—she lighted her lamp and hurried to dress herself; after which she crept softly down-stairs

She heard Betsey, the servant-girl, stirring up the fire in the kitchen-stove, but she did not go there; she slipped into the sitting-room, drawing toward the great tiled fireplace, from which came the faint, smothered glimmer of the covered hickory coals. There was still heat enough to make the vicinity of the hearth quite comfortable; she crouched down by it, poked the ashes away from the buried fire, so that she could see better, and glanced with curiosity at a short row of bulging stockings which hung on a little line below the tall mantelpiece.

It had been made up between her and the schoolmaster that they should play children and "hang up their stockings." David's blue-yarn sock was there, also. They had had a great deal of fun the previous evening disposing these articles to their satisfaction and wondering what Santa Claus would bring them.

Ruth had no intention of examining the contents until the others had arrived to share the inspection. But she had found no suitable opportunity, the night before, of depositing *her* gift in the teacher's stocking without being observed. Therefore she had stolen down early to do so. She saw, by the dim red light, that there were things in *her* stocking. Had *he* placed any of them?—and, oh, *what* would they be? Still, she would not look, until the time agreed upon. With nervous, trembling fingers she slipped her present into the schoolmaster's long silk stocking. It was an elegant, costly stocking. She had thought her soft white merino one pretty enough, but it was no match for this. The ever-lurking fear that Mr. Otis, poor as he seemed to be, must despise her and her people and their country ways returned upon her in full force and she half-withdrew her hand, while a painful struggle went on in her mind. But the powerful temptation overcame her fears and she fiercely thrust down into the silken toe a little oval package wrapped in tissue paper.

Mistaken Ruth! She had done what no girl should ever do, unless she is engaged to him—given her picture to a young man. It is true that when she had once shown the photograph to Mr. Otis he had carelessly said that he would like a copy of it—that was all. And now she had bestowed it on him without further solicitation. Girls cannot be too chary of such gifts. Men are too mannish to need such encouragement.

But then, Ruth, was very young, and very innocent and ignorant. She thought she might properly make a "Christmas gift" of her picture to her teacher; half the girls in school had already bestowed these tokens of

friendship upon him. How many of these he had thrown away she did not know or care. She felt positive that he would not serve hers so. It was a pretty—a very pretty face in that little oval case! She knew it. Ruth was a modest, sensitive girl; but she could not help knowing that she was very handsome, and the photograph had caught her "happiest expression"—as the artist termed it—the coquettish droop of the long lashes, the slight arching of the dark brows as if she studied some mischief, the smile about the pretty mouth, while the hundred little rings and tendrils of chestnut-brown hair, curling about the white, intellectual forehead, were almost as lovely in the picture as in the reality.

After she had dropped her gift into the silk stocking Ruth crouched by the fire again, waiting for the others. A dozen times she started up to withdraw the photograph, and as often sunk back without doing it. When she had finally fully determined to leave it there she fell into a reverie about the schoolmaster.

He had been very kind to her ever since that evening when she had noticed him so gloomy and pre-occupied—kinder than ever before. He had detained her hand when she said good-night on Christmas Eve, pressing it tenderly, and looking at her with *such* a look! Her heart beat fast at the memory of it. True, he was going to Boston on the morrow; but it was only on business, and he had taken pains to tell her that he disliked going, and would have avoided it had it been possible for him to have done so.

And then, somehow, Ruth's thoughts wandered off to another young man who had also pressed her hand and looked at her with *such* a look, the previous evening; and who had gone off early, and in a pet, because she had treated him coolly in the presence of the schoolmaster.

Jasper Judson was the eldest son of the farmer whose land joined Fletcher's. The Fletchers were rich and the Judsons were rich, according to the limited idea of riches of their neighbors. Both owned large and well-cultivated farms, with stock and implements in abundance, and great, comfortable houses, with lawns in front, summer-houses on the lawns, and carriages and carriage-horses in the stables. Each had quite a sum of money, saved in prosperous seasons, in the Boston banks. Both families aspired to some style and more cultivation. Jasper was being fitted by Mr. Otis for college, while Ruth had been away at an academy for two years, and could jabber bad French and play the piano better than the majority of young ladies.

So that the settled idea of the fathers of the young people that Judson's son and Fletcher's daughter were well matched, and ought to mate when the right time came, was a very sensible and pleasant view of matters.

The parties most interested had held the same views until quite recently—until, in fact, "the Boston snob" had come to teach the winter school, and Ruth had concluded to attend it.

Not that Ruth and Jasper were engaged, or ever had been. He had been contented, so far, to know that she always preferred him to any other escort, when they went to evening church, singing-school, sleighing-parties or spelling-bees. But, since the advent of Mr. Otis—handsome, dark, mysterious, self-possessed, contemptuous doubtless—his feelings had changed. Rage, sorrow, burning jealousy had taken the place of expectant content. His heart had grown sorcer and sorcer, until it would no longer bear the least jar given by careless Ruth more often than was necessary.

He had come over on Christmas Eve, notwithstanding he had been so angry with Ruth that he had not spoken to her when they last met—had come, driven to torment himself still more keenly by bringing his actual eyes to behold what his mental ones pictured constantly—the sight, so hateful to him, of the haughty schoolmaster making himself agreeable to Ruth—*his* Ruth.

"What is he, anyhow?" Jasper had said to himself, going over. "Only a country school-teacher! I could buy him out, six times over!"

Yet, though only a teacher, as Jasper said, the country boy felt the full weight of the power which ease, knowledge of the world, elegant manners and graceful accomplishments gave to the one he considered his rival.

It had been agreed upon, before Jasper went away the previous evening, to have a grand skating-party on the river Christmas night. Ruth, sitting there in the slowly-growing dawn, her bright eyes fixed on the glimmering coals, hoped and wished that Mr. Otis would make one of the party; yet she hardly believed he would.

Then she contrasted, in her busy mind, Jasper and the teacher. Poor Jasper! he came very sorrowly out of the experiment.

Then, all in a thrill and with her fair face burning with blushes, the dreaming girl sprung to her feet, laughing at her own embarrassment. Mr. Otis stood on the hearth; David came softly behind him.

"Merry Christmas to both!" cried the boy; and there were laughing, and pleasant wishes, and a gay examination of the contents of the stockings.

The first thing the teacher drew from his was a ferule.

"You gave me that, David," and the boy laughed at his own joke.

Then the hand of the owner went deeper and drew up the little oval package. Ruth bent over her own stocking that he might not read the telltale expression of her face; David was deep in the surprises of his own sock; so neither noticed the glimmer of a scornful, satirical smile which played an instant over the teacher's face, as he unfolded the tissue-paper and saw its contents.

"Little fool!" was what he thought: "Little beauty!" was what he said.

Ruth could not read the thought, but she heard the words, and the flush on her cheeks grew deeper, though she affected not to hear, being so busy with her own treasures. For Ruth, being an only daughter, was not slighted by her family.

There were many nice things in her stocking—a purse from father, with fifty dollars, pin-money, in it—a handsome card-case from David—a set of coral jewelry from mother—and last, at the very bottom of all, a tiny box. On opening this, there in its white-velvet bed sparkled a diamond ring! She uttered a low cry: then, looking as if on the verge of laughter and tears, she gathered up her apron, with stocking and all in it, and fled up to her own room without once looking the schoolmaster in the face. Locking the door, she sat down on the edge of the bed, her heart fluttering, her breath panting.

"A ring! Of course *he* gave it to me! There is no one else would think of such a thing—except Jasper!—and if Jasper gave me a ring, it would be some cheap, common thing! This is a real diamond, like those he wears in his bosom. It could come from no one else. And I know what it means! Diamond rings are engagement-rings. Oh, I hoped so—I hoped so, before, and now I am certain of it! What a happy, happy, happy girl I am!"

All in a tremble, blushing, crying, smiling, she drew the beautiful jewel from its velvet cushion and examined it.

"Ruth" was engraved on the inside of the ring. She tried it on "the engagement-finger" of her left hand; it fitted as if the dimpled finger had been measured for it.

The bell rung for breakfast. It seemed to her as if she could never face him now. Yet she must go down, or father and mother would think it strange; she had not yet thanked them for their gifts. While she hesitated, some one tried the door and then knocked.

"Who is it?"

"I," answered David's voice.

"Do you want anything?"

"Yes; I want to tell you what he said."

Ruth opened the door a little way—she did

not want her brother's sharp eyes to read her face.

"He gave the ring to me to put in your stocking, sis; and he said, 'Tell her, if she puts it on her finger and wears it, I will take it as a sign and a promise.'"

"Yes, David. Thank you. You are a good brother," whispered the girl. "Run down to breakfast now."

"You come, too; mother's asking after you."

Ruth ran back and replaced the ring on her finger—she had returned it to its box, too timid to show it down stairs. Then she stole down to the great kitchen where the family usually partook of its meals in winter time. She glided in like a morning sunbeam; then, as Mr. Otis looked up, smiling at her, she veiled her emotion in a rush to her mother, whom she embraced, and thanked for her lovely gift. Father, too, had to be hugged and kissed and thanked; finally, all in a flurry and confusion, Ruth took her place at table beside the teacher, her happy eyes veiled shyly by their long lashes, her sweet voice trembling a little when she replied to his commonplace remarks about the weather, the skating party, and other home topics.

It chanced, though the teacher staid home all day, that he and Ruth were not left alone together a single moment. There were friends of the family to dinner. The brief day soon drew toward dark, and Ruth, almost as awed and frightened as she was happy, felt it a relief that Mr. Otis had no opportunity of speaking to her privately. It was enough that they had come to a mutual understanding. Her wearing of his ring was all that was necessary. Whenever her shy, soft eyes did venture to meet his own, there was a silent laugh deep down in those black eyes that she hardly understood. But his manner was very devoted; so much so, that the visitors noticed it, rallying her in private over her "conquest," as people do on such occasions. And David would look so knowing that he made her blush more than once.

At dinner Mr. Otis had promised to go down on the ice with them that night.

"This evening, when we are together on the river, he will speak to me, and thank me for wearing his ring," thought happy Ruth; "I can bear to have it spoken about then."

"I wish I had not promised to go with Jasper Judson," was her thought, all the afternoon. "But, I need not keep much with him. Mr. Otis will find a way to take me away from him."

Evening came and brought Jasper.

He looked rather pale and cold when he came in, but soon warmed, and was bright and gay—more so than they had seen him for weeks. He was a fine-looking young fellow—a little awkward yet—he was only twenty—but full of spirit and fire. It was easy to see that he had a will of his own. The flash of his clear gray eye, the firm line of his handsome mouth betrayed it; also that he was open-hearted, generous and brave.

The little party were soon ready to join the larger one on the ice. Mr. Otis and David went a little in advance, followed by Jasper and Ruth. Jasper lingered on the way exasperatingly. His companion's eyes followed the lessening figure of Mr. Otis; her thoughts were all with him.

They had come to a secluded place on their way to the river, when Ruth was suddenly surprised by finding herself clasped in Jasper's trembling arms.

"Dear, dear, darling Ruth," he murmured, trying to find her averted face; "how can I ever thank you for your goodness. Ah, that vile schoolmaster! Why was I ever so jealous of him, when you loved me, after all, my little sweet! when I saw my ring on your finger this evening, and David told me he had given you my mes—"

"Your ring!" cried Ruth, almost with a scream, wrenching herself from him and standing erect, panting, pale, under the great golden stars that looked calmly down.

"My ring, of course, until it became yours. David told you—for he said so," stammered Jasper, confused and doubting.

Ruth snatched the jewel from her finger and threw it, with her full force, far away over the sparkling snow; then she burst into a laugh,

"Pardon me for misleading you, Jasper Judson. I thought—upon my word!—I thought David gave me the nasty little glass diamond!" and she laughed long and merrily.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCIDENT AND AN ACCUSATION.

JASPER was not deceived by the little white lie Ruth had told to conceal her mortification and disappointment.

He saw, in one lightning flash, the mistake she had made. He knew that those beaming looks, which he falsely dreamed were owing to his gift, had been caused by her belief that Mr. Otis had given her the ring.

For a few moments the two stood in the road silent. The brilliant starlight falling on the glittering snow made light enough for Jasper to see the blank misery on his companion's face had he chosen to look. But, awkward and coarse as Ruth thought him, in comparison with another, he was the truer gentleman of the two.

Mr. Otis would have looked—and smiled. Jasper was too considerate, too delicate, even in that moment of rage and pain, to gaze upon the embarrassment which he knew was there.

"Oh, I shall die! I shall die!" was the girl's silent cry, as she thought over the day and felt that Mr. Otis *must* have perceived her mistake. "I shall die from shame and misery! He was laughing at me all the time! Oh, how cruel! How wicked! He might so easily have underrived me in some delicate way. I hate him. I hate Jasper. I hate everybody. Oh, I wish I were dead!"

Jasper, too, was thinking, as he set his teeth together.

"I hate him—she loves him! Curse his sneering face! If he comes in my way to-night it will be the worse for him."

Finally, with choking voice, he said:

"Take my arm, Ruth. Let us not expose ourselves to the ridicule of others. I will conduct you to the ice, and leave you with Mr. Otis."

"No—no. Not with him; leave me with David."

So they went along, silently, until they came in sight of the gay party thronging the smooth ice of the river, where, a half-mile above the mill-pond, it flowed straight, broad and swift, in summer, and in winter made the finest skating-ground anywhere in the vicinity. A large fire of logs and brushwood had been built on shore, where cold toes could be toasted, and where a great kettle full of coffee steamed, ready for any who desired it. The young people had brought good things in baskets, too; since, this being Christmas night, they had resolved upon the novelty of a picnic on the ice.

As they drew near the two saw the schoolmaster already surrounded by a bevy of admiring girls. With a scowl upon his usually pleasant face, Jasper looked at him a minute, and then, approaching David, with Ruth still on his arm, he said:

"Take care of your sister a little while; I must help the boys place more logs on the fire."

"Shall I strap your skates on for you, Ruth?" asked the boy.

"No," she answered him, bitterly. "I never want you to do anything for me again."

"Now, what's up, sis? Didn't I do the errand jolly this morning?"

She did not reply, and he looked, in surprise, at her pale face and glistening eyes; not a glimmer of the truth made its way into his innocent brain.

She walked quickly toward a group further away, so as to avoid the teacher's eyes, but he had already given her one quick, sidelong look, unperceived. Sitting on a block of ice, she

was working to put on her skates herself, when Mr. Otis came up.

"Allow me, Ruth," he said, smiling at her with those inscrutable eyes of his, as he bent, on one knee, to assist her.

"Do you skate? I forgot what you told me about it," she asked him, trying to affect carelessness—her heart was nearly bursting out of her bosom, but pride enabled her to steady her voice and to look him in the face as he answered:

"I used to be the champion skater at college. I have not practiced lately, and to-night I am unprovided with skates."

"Somebody must lend you a pair. Jasper Judson is held to be the champion skater of Pentacket. I should like to see you two try a race together."

"If I can borrow a good pair of skates, you shall be obliged, Miss Ruth. Though, as I say, I am out of practice."

The skates were on by this time, and Ruth, rising, glided away from him, and off by herself, on a more deserted part of the river. As the schoolmaster had no skates he could not follow her; and Jasper would not, so, for awhile, she was alone, as she wished to be.

By this time her cheeks, instead of being pale, were scarlet with the tingling flush of shame. The one terrible thought, that she had betrayed her heart to Mr. Otis, made her almost desperate. It seemed as if she could never face him, or Jasper, or the world again.

She glided up and down swiftly, in a vain attempt to forget about that hated ring; gradually, other young people came about her, rallying her for liking her own company so well—and then, who so gay, who so witty, who so pretty, what girl such a daring skater as Ruth Fletcher? She had the other girls jealous in less than half an hour, for she flirted with all the fellows impartially.

"He shall see that I'm not heartbroken yet!" was the thought in her mind as she laughed and chattered, the loveliest and the merriest of all those red-cheeked maidens flitting about in the fantastic light and shadow of the great bonfire, whose leaping flames lightened and darkened, casting weird light over the snowy shores, the smooth-swept ice, and the ever-flitting, ever-changing figures.

There were several matches of skill on skates, before the picnic refreshments were served at ten o'clock. While the whole party was gathered at one spot partaking of the cakes and coffee, some talk came up about Jasper Judson's wonderful feats on the ice. Ruth remarked that Mr. Otis had also once held the championship; whereupon there was great anxiety to see the two do their best.

At first, the teacher excused himself for being out of practice and having no skates; but, being pressed, yielded, one of his pupils having tendered him the use of a satisfactory pair of club skates, and he consented to the trial.

Having been renowned at college in all games of strength and skill, Mr. Otis doubtless expected an easy victory.

But his rival—in more than the art of skating—was burning with a desire for some sort of conquest over this "insufferable city snob," as in his heart he regarded him.

All the evening his anger and his hatred had been growing; there was no laughter in that flash of the eye with which he accepted the challenge.

All the others remained idle while these two went through an astonishing number of skillful exercises, including all possible known feats of carving the American eagle, writing their names, etc.; and neither had gained a victory over the other. Finally, a race up the river was to be run. The course was passable for at least three miles, though the windings of the river made it too crooked for the spectators to keep the skaters in sight, as they shot off, like arrows from tight-strained bows. Of course, none but themselves knew in what order they reached the goal. They came to it the same second of time.

"We will race back," said Jasper, biting off his words, "past the ground where the folks

are, on down to the elm tree, a quarter of a mile this side the mill-dam. We ought not to go beyond that, as the ice is thin over the rapid water, and full of air-holes. What do you say?"

"Agreed. One—two—three—off!"

The schoolmaster skated on the long run as if he were shod with the wind, instead of mortal skates. Shutting his teeth together, cursing him, almost, in his bitter young passion-swelling heart, Jasper fled after him. He had come up the stream at an equal pace with his rival. Yet now it seemed likely to prove that this effeminate "city snob" had muscles better trained than his own—had a reserved power only beginning to be called on, when he, the country-bred athlete, was panting and wearing out.

Every energy of Jasper's was called to the rescue, as he saw himself falling hopelessly behind. Yet, when they came in sight of the watchful group around the bonfire, he was two rods behind his companion. The thought that Ruth was among those spectators to witness his discomfiture, spurred Jasper to still more desperate exertion; and when they passed the party—whose cheers and waving handkerchiefs produced but small impression on their strained senses—the two were nearly abreast.

But as soon as a sharp turn of the river, whose banks were fringed with bushes at that spot, took them out of sight again, Jasper found himself unable to keep up "the spurt," and again fell behind.

It was fifteen or twenty minutes before the party saw, coming back as slowly as he had gone down swiftly, Jasper Judson. His face was deadly pale, his eyes stared from their sockets; but no one, at first, noticed this.

"Where's Mr. Otis?" "Who beat?" "Who's the winner?" "Where's the teacher?" as sailed him on every side as he came up.

He looked about in a dumb, dazed sort of way.

"I'm afraid he's done for," he answered, hoarsely.

"Done for? Did you beat him? Hurrah!" cried David Fletcher.

"I mean—drowned," stammered Jasper, like a man waking out of a sleep. "He must have skated into an air-hole. I was—" But here a low, sharp, heart-piercing scream interrupted him and made him turn and look at Ruth.

"When? Where?" cried all the young men of the party.

"Great heaven! something must be done!"

"I fear you are too late. But come on! I'll show you"—and the men all rushed away on their swift skates, leaving the girls confounded, terrified, and some of them fainting.

Ruth went off by herself and sat down on a block of ice. She did not speak or move during the long half-hour the men were away. These came back, unwillingly and mournfully.

"It's no use," said he who arrived first. "When a man goes into an air-hole on a night like this, with a swift-running stream to wash him down, it's no use."

There had been no chance before to hear from Jasper the first particulars of the accident; he was asked for them now.

"I don't rightly know how it happened," he spoke, still as if dazed, pressing his hand to his forehead. "We were to skate to the elm that bends over the river, you know. I was quite sure there were no air-holes this side of the tree. He got ahead of me, considerable, after we passed here, and was out of my sight a minute around that bend, you know, where the willows grow so thick, and when I came 'round after him he was nowhere in sight. I thought it strange. Just then I heard a sort of muffled cry. I dashed forward, and nearly went into the hole myself. When I saw it, I thought, all in a flash, what must have happened, and I flung myself down, and crawled as near to it as I could. I saw I could do no good that way, and I made a dash for a rail from Squire Peters' fence, and I got it across

the hole, and supported myself by it, but the stream must have swept him down. So I skated ahead, with my rail, to the next air-hole, but could see or hear nothing; there was nothing to do but give him up."

The awe-stricken group that listened was formed about Ruth. She heard every word that Jasper spoke, but he did not look at her.

There was nothing for the girls to do but go home. The most of the men were going down to the dam to see if they could find anything of the body there—though it was not probable.

David went off with these; Ruth still sat on her icy seat. The most of the girls had gone off homeward. Jasper, after a long hesitation, advanced and offered his arm to the stricken girl.

"You are not fit to go home alone," he said; "let me take you."

She sprung to her feet; her face was white, but her eyes flashed up into his bending face one terrible look of accusation.

"Never speak to me again, Jasper Judson! You could have saved him if you would, I do believe. And you *knew* of that air-hole this side the elm—it has been there all winter. You are as good as a murderer. I don't know what other folks will call you, but *I* call you a murderer!"

CHAPTER VII.

SPREADING SNARES FOR GLITTERING WINGS.

ONE of the three friends who had been with Otis Garner at the club, the night of the famous wager, was something worse than a young fellow "sowing his wild oats," which was the worst that could be said of the remainder of the quartette.

The only one of the four who had not been spoiled by the indulgence of rich relatives, "Brummell" Pomeroy had never possessed any good qualities to be perverted. Nature had spoiled him in the making, having been nearly out of moral qualities when she compounded his heart and brain. He was an adventurer by profession; it was his business to make friendships with very young, very rich men, and to get his living out of them. Not over twenty-six or eight himself, at the time of the adventure from the steps of the Tremont, he knew how to command the confidence and admiration of fellows like Otis Garner. In the first place, he dressed always to such absolute perfection and with such consummate taste, that he was their envy and their wonder. This talent had gained him the *sobriquet* of Brummell, the initial of his given name being B.—probably for Benjamin; he never wrote it in full. Then, he understood all there was to understand about wines, about cards, about horses; if his intimates were to believe him—and they generally did—he was also very wise about women, and an immense favorite with them. All these accomplishments being of a kind to demand the admiration of his companions, they did admire him, and thought it a fine thing to be considered confidential friends of Mr. Pomeroy.

Without having any personal beauty, except a tall figure, Brummell had the reputation of great elegance, and was called a handsome man. His eyes were small, of no particular color, and close together. His nose was long, his forehead low, his mouth wide; but, he had a well cared-for mustache, waxed after a foreign fashion, which partially concealed his disagreeable lips. His hands and feet, though long, were slender, and looked well in immaculate gloves and boots.

He had been the most amused of any at the spirited way in which young Garner had fulfilled his word of honor as to the wager. Also, he had most closely observed the innocence and beauty of the poor girl who had been its victim. Those small, light eyes of his had feasted themselves on every particular of the childish, sweet loveliness of the little bride who had stood at the altar with his friend. During the following week he had contrived—*how*, Garner himself could not have told, for it was

his intention to keep it a sacred secret from all—to get the address of the bride's mother.

Consequently, it followed that—when the crash came about the unfortunate young man's ears, and he was disinherited, and finally left the city—this intimate friend of his, alone of all his acquaintances, knew where the little bride lived *perdu*. Not a word of his knowledge did he breathe to any other.

But, not long after Otis Garner left for New York, it came to be an almost daily occurrence for Brummell Pomeroy to walk once or twice of an afternoon up and down the humble but respectable court in which the Widow Lovelace and her daughter dwelt.

He often met his friend's deserted bride going out or coming in; for very shortly after Otis Garner left Boston, little Mildred resumed her work of giving music-lessons to the two or three little girls whose mothers employed the incompetent young thing because she was *cheap*. Mildred could not help noticing one whose surpassing elegance made him doubly conspicuous in such a place; but, she did not associate him with Otis; nor did she ever dream that these promenades had any connection with her humble self. She puzzled herself for a few days, after encountering him so frequently, as to what *could* bring such a gentleman into that vicinity; concluding, finally, that it was no affair of hers, and she would not vex her thoughts about him—though she *did* wish his business, whatever it was, had called him in some other direction, for she did not like having to pass and repass him so often.

He always scanned her so closely; it was embarrassing. Soon, whenever he caught her eye, he bowed, or lifted his hat; but so seriously, so respectfully, she could take no offense. She gave him the coldest possible little nod in return; and that was as far as their acquaintance progressed for some time.

As we know, young Garner left his wife quite a little sum of money, besides the rich presents he had lavished on her. Fifteen hundred dollars, in her eyes, was a small fortune. She meant—now that he was poor—to spend it very, very prudently; but, when week after week went by, and she had no word from him, except the first two or three brief, coldly-courteous notes he had sent her in the last fortnight, she began to realize that he did, indeed, mean to leave her utterly. Bearing his name—bound to him—her title of wife was to prove an idle mockery. In his last brief letter had been another suggestion that three years of willful absence on his part would give her the right to regain her liberty, coupled with formal regrets that his wild freak in marrying her must keep her so long from the love and admiration of such other suitors as one so lovely and amiable was sure to have.

Not a breath of affection from his lips; not a hint that their relations could ever be more intimate; not an idea, that in marrying her he had already secured her love—her fondest, deepest love, not for a day or a year, but for a lifetime!

When Mildred had read it, the soft blush on her cheek when she opened it had faded to a cold white.

"He is bound to get rid of me. He bitterly repents the 'wild freak' which made me his. Oh, I repent it, too! Oh, I repent the foolish consent so quickly won! Not on my own account—no, for I would suffer a life of solitude just to live on the memory of those sweet half-hours when he came to see me—but on *his*! He wishes to be free. Ah me! poor little Mildred! He is ashamed of you—he cannot love you! Perhaps he loves another! Yes, I am sure of it. What was that the paper said about his uncle's plans for his marriage with a beautiful cousin? Perhaps he loves this beautiful cousin! Perhaps she returns his love. If it were not for me, he would not be driven from his home and from her presence. She lived in the same house with him—their uncle had it all nicely arranged—so the papers said. I am the miserable little upstart who has spoiled all. I 'jumped at the chance' to marry this young

gentleman. 'It is a proper punishment on me that he is disinherited and has treated me with contempt since the hour he kept his word to his friends!' Oh, yes, yes, yes! I acknowledge all. I wish I could die and get out of the way—miserable little marplot that I am!

"But, I love him—I love him—I love him!"

"That proud lady-cousin will never worship his very shadow—the echo of his footstep—as I worship them!"

Yet Mildred, childish and unworldly as she was, had pride. She resolved that she would never touch one dollar of the sum which her husband had deposited for her use.

"I will work for poor sick mamma, as I used to work; his money shall stay where it is, and when he comes back, he shall have it—every penny of it. They shall see that I am not the mercenary creature they say I am. I did think it would be pleasant to be able to give mamma all she needs; but I loved him, or I would not have said 'yes.' He seemed to me so beautiful, so superior! I thought Heaven had answered my prayer to send me a friend to take care of poor little me, when mamma was dead and gone."

So she resumed her lessons to the three or four small pupils, living even more sparingly than before, except that she disposed of some of the costly trifles Otis had given her, and bought luxuries for her mother, whose health now that winter had set in, grew worse from week to week.

And, to feed her starving heart with the thought that she was Otis Garner's bride, she would dress herself—late in the afternoon, when she had no more errands out of doors—in some one of the silken robes he had bought her, clasp his pearls about her slender neck, fasten up her shining hair with the diamond-spray, and sit and dream wild dreams about her fairy prince—wild, sweet, impossible dreams.

At the same time a passionate desire took possession of her to see her rival—this beautiful cousin, the flower of the proud old Garner family. She found out the splendid mansion of the Garners; and fell into a habit, when her last lesson of the day was through with, of going home by way of that street, no matter how far out of the way it took her.

The third time she passed the house the Garner carriage, with its black coachman, in dark-blue livery, and black horses sumptuous with gold-decorated harness, stood before it.

She recognized the coat-of-arms on the panel of the door, for she had seen it on the quaint old seal which Otis had once shown her. She walked quickly on a few rods further—then turned and came slowly back.

A lady was coming down the broad, lion-guarded steps of the house. Mildred, walking very slowly by, had a good opportunity for one long look. A girl, very nearly as young as herself, but tall and dark, and oh! so splendidly beautiful!

Mildred's great, childish, violet eyes fell, eager as they were, when the bright glance of the superb young beauty chanced to encounter their earnest observation. How like a princess, "to the manor born," the heiress glided down the steps, floated across the pavement, and entered the luxurious carriage whose door was held open for her by another liveried servant!

How her velvets, and laces, and flowers became her, as the rich feathers of the tropical bird became it! What a dainty little hand, with a pearl-colored glove which fitted like the skin, lay, carelessly clasping a costly handkerchief, on the amber satin of the carriage-cushions, as she gave some directions—in a voice musical as the breathings of the "lovely lute"—to the coachman.

But was there—or was there not—just a shadow over that brilliant face? as if the girl possibly thought of some loss or grief? Mildred asked herself.

"Is she sorry, or is she glad, that, by his folly, she has got his fortune?"

"Does she love him, and grieve? Or, has she only gained?"

The restless horses dashed gayly off with their lovely burden.

Mildred could not answer her own questions; but she went home, a thousand times more melancholy than before she had seen this peerless creature.

"No study, no toil, no endeavor, will ever make me like her. She is born to grace, and pride, and high-bred ease; while I am constrained, and humble, and poor. No wonder that he despises me! Oh, my proud, fairy prince! Your poor little Mildred is but the lowly violet for you to set your foot upon. She is your fitting mate. I see it—I feel it."

Then, out of her very despair, there arose in Mildred's soul a mighty resolve to make herself a lady and meet companion for him whose name she bore.

"I will take her for my example," thought the poor child. "I will steal a look at her as often as I dare. I will notice her dress, her movements, her way of doing this and that. I will try to be as like her as possible. Yet I shall be ridiculous when she is incomparable. Nevertheless, I will try. I love him—and I will try."

She spoke the last words aloud, as she hurried homeward, and she set her tiny foot on the pavement with a resolute tap. She had been so engrossed with her own thoughts that she had noticed nothing.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Garner," said a polite voice.

She stopped, startled and blushing to be called by that name.

It was the gentleman she had passed so many times.

He stood, most respectfully soliciting her attention; though the day was cold, he held his hat in his hand.

"Will you excuse my speaking to you without an introduction, and on the street?" he began, most beseechingly and courteously. "The fact is, Mrs. Garner, I am deeply anxious to hear from Mr. Garner. We are intimate—very intimate—friends, if you will believe me; brothers, almost; yet he has given us all the slip. We, who are so fond of him, and so anxious to prove our friendship, have not even his present address. Will you be so good as to favor me with it?" and returning his hat to his head, he took out note-book and pencil.

"Indeed, sir, I am sorry, but I do not know it myself."

"Ah, I see, Mrs. Garner; you are very properly cautious. Of course, you know your husband's address, but you will not give it to a stranger. Here is my card—B. Pomeroy. You must have heard him speak of me. 'Brummell,' he calls me—a joke of his."

"I do not remember his speaking of you. But then," added Mildred, looking up with an artless blush and sad smile, "that is not strange. Our acquaintance was so short."

"Yes, yes, I know. Why, my dear, dear lady, I was one of the four who laid down the wager; I saw you two meet; I saw you two married. A wild frolic, perhaps, but it ended charmingly. We all considered our friend Garner a lucky fellow! It was a frightful lottery, yet he drew a splendid prize. We all envied him when we saw the bride."

"I scarcely think he was to be envied, Mr. Pomeroy," said little Mildred, with a blending of humility and dignity very sweet and touching to see, and she attempted to pass him.

"One moment, please. Yes, I know, I know—lost the old uncle's money—for a time, only, I dare say—but gained a prize richly worth the whole of it."

"My husband does not seem to think so, sir," responded Mildred. "My mother will be looking for me, Mr. Pomeroy. I would like to oblige you, but I have not heard from Mr. Garner for some time. He is in New York. I cannot tell you the street or number of his residence."

"Ten thousand thanks! If I hear from him soon, I shall take the liberty of letting you know," and with another profound bow, he passed on.

The little twelve-year-old maid whom Mrs. Lovelace kept to do their roughest work and to wait upon her in her daughter's absence, met Mildred at the door with word that her

mother was worse. This alarming news banished the thick-thronging fancies about the beautiful cousin and the strange gentleman from Mildred's mind for that evening.

But the mother got better, and the old dreams filled again the mind of the deserted child-wife.

And one week from the day on which he had addressed her, at meeting her on the street, Mr. Brummell Pomeroy called and sent in his card, by the little maid, to Mrs. Lovelace and Mrs. Garner.

"He has news of him!" cried Mildred, and she met the man of duplicity at the door of their modest parlor, a glow on her cheek and fire in her eye and a smile on her lip that made the artless little wife as beautiful as some houri.

The false-hearted man of the world knew that bright look was not called up by pleasure at seeing him; but he resolved, then and there, that the time should come when he would have that power.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HANDWRITING AFTER DEATH.

It was Christmas night—the first Christmas after the mad marriage which had sent Otis Garner to wander over the earth a ruined and aimless man—and the great house of the Garners was ablaze with light from basement to attic. Yet there was no merry-making going on in the old mansion. There was not even one guest to break the silence which reigned through the illuminated splendor of the drawing-room. The servants had lighted up the rooms, according to custom; but not for the reception of troops of joyous friends and relatives.

Old Mr. Garner was no exception to a common rule—that as a man grows older and colder and richer his friends fall away. Not but that he had an army of admirers who would fain be intimate with him; but he kept these at their distance—admirers, sharers at times of a sumptuous hospitality, but not heart-friends. And since the bright, gay, handsome, faulty boy, on whom he had lavished nearly all that was left of his withering affections, had so cruelly disappointed him—and since he had driven this boy from his heart and home—the old man had felt little disposed for empty shows of gayety. Crowds of idle pleasure-seekers were no longer invited to dance and chatter and feast under his princely roof.

Did he forget his young niece, and that life was not all over with her—that she might crave the stimulus of gay society? No. But Honoria was not a boy—she did not bear the Garner name—she never could be to him what Otis had been.

Nevertheless, he remembered her—that she was his niece and his heiress; and that society had claims on her. More than once he had offered to give her a grand ball or more modest German. But Honoria herself had refused. What was the matter with her, that the young beauty shrank, almost as much as the old uncle, from the fashionable dissipations of the season?

There were dozens of young scions of the bluest blood of Boston who were pining for an opportunity to declare in what high esteem they held her: i.e., her beauty, rank and fortune.

Yet she remained indifferent to the triumphs in store for her the moment she might deign to accept them.

That perverse quality of human nature which makes an object dear in proportion as it is unattainable, had suddenly, in the hour in which she heard him declare himself married, given to her cousin Otis a charm and power he had never before had for her. Not that pure-minded Honoria was so wicked as to knowingly cherish a love for one lost to her by marriage with another; on the contrary, she made every effort to put him out of her thoughts.

Did you ever attempt, on a sultry summer day, to brush away a fly that annoys you? Then, you know, that the more attention you

give the buzzing insect, the more persistently will he return to the attack. So it was with Honoria's thoughts of her cousin. When she knew him her slave and lover, she gave small heed to thoughts of him that might hum drowsily about her; but now that such thoughts must be brushed away, behold! they return and return to trouble and annoy.

In the shock and surprise of his avowed marriage, she, for the first time, felt that she loved him with whom she had so carelessly trifled. Now that she had lost him she realized how dear he had grown, through months and years of companionship. Otis had his faults—never mind! she could have reformed them. Otis was not wise, or prudent, or very intellectual, or very good; she had imagined finer ideals of a man—never mind! she loved him—loved his very faults and follies!

Oh, that she had known her own heart sooner!

In the three long months since, casting that wild look of farewell into her troubled eyes, he had gone away, she had found enough to do to study how to forget him as a lover and learn to serve him as a friend.

She knew to a certainty almost nothing about Otis since his departure. She had heard a rumor that he was in New York; she had heard from some source—she could not trace it—that he had never been near the poor girl whom he married since the hour they stood at the altar together—that was all. Whether this rumor was true—what was the girl's name—who she was, where she lived, how she looked, acted; what she knew—this was all a blank to Honoria. She had formed in her mind an idea of what this girl was like. Bold and unblushing she must be, or she never would have taken up with such an offer; coarse, ignorant, impudent, ungrateful; with the rude beauty of the factory girl—for some one, somewhere, had averred that the bride was handsome. This was the image of her cousin's wife which presented itself to Honoria whenever she thought of her. It was seldom that any pity for the girl softened the severity of the proud heiress' condemnation. Her pity, her tenderness, were all for the wayward, frolicsome cousin whose high spirits, and the temptations of bad company, had led him into this fatal folly.

It was Christmas night, as we said; the stately dinner in the great dining-room was over, and the two, who had partaken very lightly of its long succession of luxurious dishes, were now in the brilliant drawing-room.

Mr. Garner sat by a small table drawn up in front of the silver-barred grate, where a golden fire nestled cosily.

His "lean and slippers" feet were伸tched toward its comfortable warmth; his eyes were on the heart of the golden fire, though a book, half-dropping from his hand, gave pretext of occupation.

On Christmas night what can an old man do but think of by-gone Christmas nights?

Honoria, curled up in a corner of a sofa, watched him from a distance. Perhaps she cried a little, for something round and bright sparkled in the sudden upleaping of a rosy jet of flame in the grate, as she lifted her face and looked longingly at the old man dreaming his dreams.

A moment more and she was at his feet.

"Uncle, dear, dear uncle!"

"Well, my child?"

"We are so lonely!"

"Oh! we are?"

"Yes, uncle, you are lonely too! I can see it in your face! Forgive poor Otis, uncle! Oh, forgive him, and send for him to come home!"

"With his bride out of the streets?"

"Oh, not out of the streets, dear uncle—she was a music-teacher; she may be good and lovable—we do not know, (and I do not think it to herself) and, at all events, they say he is not living with her—never has lived with her."

The eager, beautiful eyes were upturned to the old man's; her soft little hands were clasped

over his knee; he looked quietly down into the dark, blooming face, and said, slowly:

"Would you have me re-make my will yet a third time, Honoria? If Otis is forgiven, and comes back to this as his home, he must have the property left to him as at first designed. Reflect! You will no longer have the interest in that property which, as my nephew's wife, you would have had. All that is over and gone, now. Are you willing to give up your own prospects to Otis—and to Otis' wife?"

"There is enough for all of us, dear uncle."

"I have not built up this fortune as patiently as I have, to break it in pieces over my grave. It is my pride, my ambition, to keep it together in one great whole, as it now is. Therefore I shall not leave it to two, three, or four—"

"Leave it all to my cousin, then. I prefer he shall have it."

"Not so, Honoria. The man who will do an act so utterly unwise and rash as he did, is unfit to have the control of such a fortune. Rather, let me trust it to the small hands of my girl-niece—with such promises as will prevent her from at once giving it all away."

"Let us not talk of the money, uncle dear; you have many years of vigorous life yet before you, in which to take charge of your own. But, forgive poor Otis, his folly. Send for him. I know you will be happier, uncle. Think! perhaps your harshness is driving him to yet wilder courses! Despair may make him desperate. Oh, I fret about him night and day."

"The Bible says, Honoria, 'Fret not thyself because of evil-doers,' it is good advice; take it. Remember you are but seventeen, and do not seek to give advice to your elders. Here, child, I did not intend to make you cry. But my mind is made up about Otis, and I shall not change it without better reason than I have yet seen for doing so. Come, come! dry your eyes and go to the piano and sing me some of the old ballads that you know I like!"

Her uncle seemed a hard and a grim old man to Honoria just then—though his Christmas gift of pearls and diamonds had cost many thousand dollars, and lay glittering in her hair, her tiny ears, and about her stately neck, as a testimony to his generosity—but she wiped her eyes as he bade her, and went to the piano.

This instrument stood in the music-room at the end of the long drawing-room, and separated from it by heavy silk curtains, which slipped back on gilded rings at pleasure. Honoria drew them wide apart so that her uncle might listen to the music at his ease. As she did so she started and gave a little scream.

"What is it?" asked the old man by the fire, half rising.

"Nothing—nothing at all, dear uncle! I must be growing nervous since even shadows frighten me," and with a little laugh she sat down to the piano.

Her voice trembled on the first verse of her first song; but she soon mastered it, and it swelled out sweet, plaintive, and soul-thrilling, giving a depth of feeling to the simple words of the old ballads, and chaining the heart of the listener to old scenes, old memories, old days, when a girl fairer than this one, sung these same sweet songs, while he sat by and listened, and loved, and would not tell his love because the singer's name was too lowly to fitly mate the lofty one of Garner. The Garner pride, so strong even in youth, was not less powerful now; the boy he loved had disgraced himself by a shameful mésalliance—he would have no more to do with him.

Not a breath whispered to the old man the truth, that this same reckless "boy" was, at that moment, lurking behind the curtains of the music-room, having sought the house with a faint hope that by this time his folly was pardoned; but who, hearing the sharp words replied to his cousin's unselfish petition, had shrunk back into the shadows of the music-room, resolved not to betray himself to the stern judge.

Honoria had seen him, and, at the same moment, the signal of silence which he made; and so, trembling and anxious, had continued on her way to the piano, pretending carelessness.

Perhaps for a long hour Honoria sung and played; then, with a weary sigh her uncle arose, thanked her, rung the bell for his personal attendant, and still sighing, climbed the broad, velvet-covered stairs to his own room.

"Now?" cried Honoria, as master and man went into the room above, rising from the stool and going toward the intruder, who also arose and met her half-way.

"I came from New York to-day, cousin. I am tired and homesick. I felt that I must see you again. I am penniless, too. It is hard to earn money when you have not been trained to it. I hoped uncle had repented his harshness, and would, at least, give me something to do in the counting-room, but I heard what he said to you to-night. He is merciless. Well, be it so. But you, Honoria, you are all tenderness and generosity! I shall never forget your plea in my behalf to-night. God bless you for it!"

"How did you get into the house, Otis?" she asked, more because she desired to hide her agitation than because she had any curiosity to know.

"I went away so suddenly I forgot to leave my night-key," he answered, with an attempt at a laugh. "Do not be afraid of me, however—I shall never come to rob the house. Oh, Honoria, what a lifetime it seems since I saw you last!"

The fiery eyes were burning down into her soul.

"Yes," she answered him, drawing away from him, as he would have put his arms about her, "it has been a long time. We—I—have been lonely without you. The place does not seem natural."

"I have been dying to see you," he whispered.

"Where is your wife, Otis?"

Some subtle instinct to defend herself against any love-making on his part prompted her to ask the question.

"My wife! My God, what a mockery you make of that word, cousin! Is that girl my wife? Must that mummery bind us forever?"

"Do you call mummery the solemn words spoken at the altar?"

"In my case they were. She never has been—never will be my wife. In the course of time she will go through the formality of getting a divorce from me. You love me, Honoria, even as I love you. Will you not promise me to wait until that time comes? I came here; more to get your promise to that, than for any other reason. Give me that promise, and I will go away and make one more earnest effort to help and raise myself. You will do that much for me, will you not, my sweet—my only love—my true wife that is to be, some day?"

She pulled away the hands he held so tight they were almost crushed in his clasp, looking him sorrowfully but bravely in the face as she answered him.

"No, Otis, I will make no promise to you while that woman lives. I am your friend—your true, warm, earnest friend. But she is your wife. Her rights are sacred—as sacred as are my ideas of what is due to me, Otis. You must never speak to me in this manner again."

"You will not understand me," he cried, impatiently. "I do not want you to say anything wrong—only to promise for the future."

"We must not deceive ourselves, Otis. You are blind, or trying to make yourself out so. Once more, I am your friend. Try to make me more than that, and I will be nothing but a stranger to you."

She bade him sit down by her side and tell her his business troubles. She sympathized with these, and promised to try again to soften their uncle's displeasure; she was kind, angelic in her gentle tenderness—but she would allow

no more of those burning, foolish, almost wicked words with which he had begun.

At last the bells tolled midnight; promising him to meet him on the Common the following afternoon, she let him softly out of the door into the street.

She did not keep this appointment. When another morning dawned there had been a stranger visitor at the old Garner mansion than he who had entered there so quietly and stolen to the music-room to meet her whom he loved. This visitor had no latch-key; but he entered, nevertheless; and when he went away he did not go alone; the soul of the millionaire went with him, leaving houses and lands and stocks and gold behind forever.

When the servant entered Mr. Garner's room, on the following morning, he found his master dead in bed. Whether the disappointment consequent on the conduct of his nephew had aught to do with hurrying this sad event, cannot be certainly known.

Surely, the old man made the effects of his wrath permanent. Every dollar of all his property was bequeathed to his niece, Honoria Appleton, with this proviso: that she was never to share it with her cousin, Otis Garner. The gift of any portion of the estate, or of any sum of money, or any jewels or personal property, to this Otis, would render the whole will void; and in that case the estate should go to a distant relative—a strange Garner, living in another part of the country.

So did the implacable old man perpetuate his anger.

The name, signed firmly to that unjust will, made it impossible for Honoria to follow the impulse of her heart, and made her wretched.

CHAPTER IX.

POISONED FLOWERS.

LITTLE Mildred sat alone in her humble sitting-room on New Year's night; her mother, growing more and more feeble, now seldom left her bedroom, unless for two or three hours at mid-day.

Mildred sat alone, and she and her splendid dress made a strange contrast to her surroundings. On this night, in her sorrow and her forlornness, she had indulged in her fancy to wear the rich raiment her husband had given her during those few weeks—those bright, unreal, wonderful, blissful weeks—when he came every day “to make the acquaintance,” as he said, “of this sweet stranger, whom he called his wife.”

To-night she had even gone so far as to array herself in the white satin and lace dress in which she had been married. There, in the poor little room, she sat, pale, sad, lovely, like Cinderella awaiting her godmother's coach-and-four.

The glistening bridal robe fell richly about her dainty figure; there were pearls about her graceful neck, bracelets about her white arms; but, instead of the bridal veil, she had taken down her long, bright hair and shaken it out in a thousand rippling strands, until she looked like some nymph of the sea, dressed in the silver and pearl of its caves, and sitting in the midst of a golden fountain.

Surely, surely, had the proud old man, now lying under the snow of the churchyard, once beheld this delicate young creature, in her innocence and her loveliness, he would not have so relentlessly punished his nephew for his rash act.

But he never had seen her, and now—it was too late. She sat there, alone, with pale cheeks, but bright, wide, expectant eyes, holding in her small hands a most exquisite large bouquet of cut flowers, whose perfume filled the room. These flowers had come to her that morning; a messenger had left them with the little maid-of-all-work; there was no card attached, nor was any name left; so poor little Mildred, her heart leaping high in her breast, took it for granted that Mr. Garner had returned to Boston and had sent these lovely blossoms as a token that he would call upon her some time that day.

All day she had waited.

Restless as some brilliant humming-bird she had flitted about her mother, or darted to the window, until the dark came and she was pale and tired-looking and waiting. At twilight the thought had come to her to robe herself in her wedding-dress; and now she sat, pale, impatient, clasping the flowers which she dreamed came from him.

Ah, she was not mistaken! He was coming!

A step paused in front of the house, came up to the door, the bell rung, the little maid answered the summons—in another moment she would see him, hear his voice.

Starting to her feet, clasping the roses to her panting bosom, while her large eyes flashed and a vivid blush stole over her pale cheeks, she stood there, in her glistening, glimmering, snow-white wedding-dress, like some spirit of a better world hesitating whether to pause or take flight—all her soul on her trembling lips and in her brightening eyes—when the door opened, and she saw, instead of her husband—Brummell Pomeroy.

The shock of the disappointment was too great for her to conceal it. She turned paler than her dress and sunk down again into her chair without speaking one word.

Pomeroy himself, man-of-the-world as he was, stood still a full minute, dazzled by the unexpected vision of beauty and joy, for Mildred's look had been one of rapturous expectation as he came in. He had never before seen her in the dress and jewels which her husband had given her; he had expected to meet a very, very pretty, innocent, shy, embarrassed girl—but not this radiant creature!

For half a moment, too, he made the mistake of thinking the smile, the blush, the radiance were for him! Then he saw the bitter disappointment, the pale reaction—and comprehended the situation. Biting his lips, he repressed his annoyance as best he might, and waited.

“Mr. Pomeroy,” said the sweet, tremulous voice at last, “pardon my mistake. I was looking for—for—some one else.”

“Ay, Mrs. Garner, and some one else will not be here to-night. Let me prophesy that.”

“I am sure he will. He is in town—see! He sent me these flowers this morning.”

“My dear Mrs. Garner,” said the gentleman—who had been so kind to the deserted wife, always bringing her news of Otis whenever he could gain any—coming forward and taking a chair quite close to hers—“I shall hate myself for having to undeceive you. No, I will not do it. Perhaps Otis sent the flowers—he has been in Boston several days.”

“Mr. Pomeroy, did you send these?” asked Mildred, and even as she asked the question her little hands let fall into her lap the roses and English violets which she had kissed a hundred times that day.

“Mrs. Garner, you must forgive me,” he answered, with an air of humility which his club friends would have been amused at. “I did send the flowers, not meaning to take a liberty, or dreaming that they might mislead you. It was New Year's Day, and I only wished to give you evidence that you had one friend at least who remembered you, with all the most earnest good wishes of the day.”

“It was very—kind of you,” stammered Mildred, cold and pale.

“I supposed Otis had been here, with gifts far more costly than my poor flowers. Of course he has been here?”

“No—no! Are you sure he has been in town?”

“Positive. I saw him twice; though he did not know that he was recognized. But he has gone now. He left on the 4 P. M. train this afternoon.”

“Gone!”

The low cry, vibrating with anguish, thrilled through the room, but it awakened no mercy in the selfish man who sat before her, taking pleasure in her despair.

Pleasure—for he hoped, by arousing her pride and indignation—by showing her how little her husband cared for her—to win her gratitude to himself for his sympathy, his interest, his resentment at her wrongs. As, by

slow degrees, he pushed his friend Otis from her heart, he hoped to slip in and fill the vacant place. Yes, even if the affair never went beyond a harmless, but deeply interesting flirtation, it was the kind of business which absorbed a large part of the time and talents of Brummell Pomeroy.

He made his living—a luxurious living, too—out of his friends; and he found his amusement in winning away the hearts of his friends' wives. It was a noble and an honorable object to which to devote himself! And he went through with the business with the same thoroughness that distinguished his attention to dress.

Not for a long time—perhaps never—had he found a woman with so many attractions for him as our little Mildred.

She was so innocent, so unworldly, and so beautiful; she was placed in such romantic circumstances; and she was so defenseless! Here was the lamb upon which this wolf of society might prey, if it so pleased him.

Nothing pleased him better.

“Yes, my dear lady, he went away to-day. He has been in town *sub rosa*, I suspect. It was only by chance I discovered him.”

“But he might have come here. I would not have made any trouble.”

“Just so. But then—if he had other objects in view! For instance, the second time I met him he was walking, by starlight and gaslight, on the Common, with a lady by his side—his cousin, the beautiful Miss Appleton. They appeared very deeply interested in each other, indeed.”

“Why do you tell me this, Mr. Pomeroy? Do you love to be cruel?”

He was moving too fast; the little wife was sharper than he thought; he put on an air of injured innocence.

“Love to be cruel? You are severe, Mrs. Garner. No, I pity you—I take a friendly, a deep interest in your welfare. It is Otis who is cruel. It makes me angry with him—and then, I am too outspoken. Perhaps I am mistaken! Perhaps he does not love this superb cousin about whom he has raved to me for hours in days gone by. He may quite have outgrown that juvenile preference. These two, walking together on the Common at ten o'clock at night, had plenty of prosaic business to engage them, I have no doubt.

“I dare say you know, Mrs. Garner, that the uncle is dead?”

“Whose uncle? dead?” murmured Mildred—her thoughts were on those two walking together under the stars, and came back slowly to the meaning of what her companion said.

“Otis Garner's uncle. He died, alone, in his bed, very suddenly, the night before Christmas. His will settles matters pretty clearly.”

“Oh, what was it?” she asked, now all eagerness, since Otis' prospects were concerned. “Did he forgive my poor Otis? Did he have mercy, after all?”

“He left everything to his niece; and a provision that she was never to share a dollar of it with her cousin Otis, on pain of losing all. She is prohibited from doing the least thing for him. The old gentleman well knew that his niece's first impulse would be to divide her fortune with the man she loves so dearly, but whom a single inopportune step on his part has prevented her marrying.”

Mildred's fair little head drooped lower and lower; the golden vail of hair almost hid her pale face; she twisted her hands together, unconscious of how their convulsive movements betrayed the struggle going on in her heaving breast. Finally she looked up at her visitor with a deep sigh.

“She may not always be prevented from marrying him, Mr. Pomeroy. I feel that I shall not live long—my heart is breaking, I think—yet, should I be so unfortunate as to live on against my will, perhaps there may be opened a way for Otis Garner to have his desire after all. I suppose, in the course of two or three years, as he suggests, I can obtain the aid of the courts to untie this knot which is so

painful to him. I must not—I will not—hold any man an unwilling *prisoner*, bound to me by a galling chain!"

"You are right, Mrs. Garner. I honor your womanly pride as highly as I respect you. Believe me, you have my warmest, sincerest sympathy! Yes! free yourself from one who does not appreciate the good fortune which a foolish frolic bestowed upon him—who does not care for the loveliest, the purest, the sweetest woman heaven ever made! It makes my blood boil in my veins to see the indif—but no. Otis is my friend, and I ought not to say what I think of him."

"You forget. Otis loved another before he ever saw me. Can you blame him for that, Mr. Pomeroy?"

She lifted her lovely face in a piteous appeal; tears were streaming down her cheeks; she would defend the man she loved, even while her heart was breaking.

Brummel ventured to lift one of the little hands, and to press it in token of silent sympathy.

"You are too good, too generous, for a mere selfish man to understand you, little Mildred. All I can say is—there are plenty of men who would willingly give all they are worth to be in Garner's place. The mere sacrifice of a fortune would seem a light price to pay for the bliss of having such a woman as you are love them. I am a bachelor, little Mildred—but that is only because I never met my ideal before—and now, it is too late! But I am wild to talk thus to you, who are but a child, too modest, too innocent, to have the least idea of your own power. Hold yourself proudly, my little lady; do not be cast down by your husband's neglect. There are men who would risk their lives for a smile of yours. Make your husband realize your power. But there! I have said too much. Pardon me. It is as his friend, as well as yours, that I would teach you to value yourself. And now, again, pardon me! Do not think me wanting in delicacy, but as an old, tried friend of Otis, and as one knowing how he has suddenly been cut off from past opulence, and has to struggle now to earn his bread—may I ask you if you have everything you need? My purse, my time, my influence, are all at your disposal. I shall feel honored to have you make some demand upon them."

"You are very good," replied the girl-wife, "very kind, Mr. Pomeroy. I began to support myself before I met Mr. Garner, and I can do it still. But he gave me all the money he had before he went away—remember that, Mr. Pomeroy! gave me all—robbed himself! Oh, it is no fault of his that he cannot love me!" with another burst of tears. "I have left his money in the bank where he placed it for my benefit. I will starve rather than touch it! Still, there is no danger of my starving. No! thank you again for your thoughtfulness, Mr. Pomeroy; but I can take care of myself—as I have done before—and surely, surely, I will not forget that I am Otis Garner's wife, and as his wife, must act as he would have me act. As his wife I am too proud to beg or borrow," concluded the little princess, rising to her feet as if to end the interview.

Beau Brummell arose to his feet also.

"I honor and respect you the more, little Mildred; I may call you so, may I not? considering how intimate Otis and I are. But I was bound to make the offer, not knowing how you might be situated. And, now, I bid you good-night. I shall call again before many days, for I feel myself a sort of guardian—being the friend I am to Mr. Garner—of his little wife."

He pressed her hand and went away.

"By all the roses that ever grew!" he muttered, as he went down the steps, "but the little creature has spunk! I shall have to 'make haste slowly' with her. With what an air she spoke of her wifely duties and rights! I could have laughed—only it would not do. Wearing her wedding-dress in expectation of a visit from the young scamp! She looked like a seraph in it, too. She grows prettier every time I see her. Otis, little as he prizes her,

would hardly have gone away to-night without coming here, had he known that his dear Brummell was paying a friendly visit to his forsaken beauty.

"I have a mind to improve my acquaintance with his other lady-love, also. Miss Appleton is a great catch now—superb girl, too! If one could only settle down to a Benedict's life! It is deuced hard to have to always live by one's wits. To settle down on the certainty of two millions might pay for the sacrifice. I shall call on Miss Appleton as soon as the proper time arrives."

CHAPTER X.

DANGER FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE.

It was over four months since her uncle's death that Honoria Appleton sat, one fair May morning, with idle, clasped hands and bent face, dreaming in the great library opposite the drawing-room. The sun, streaming in through a lovely window of stained glass, threw strange, jewel-like colors over her white dress and dusky hair.

Honoria wore mourning for her uncle; but on these warm mornings her dress was of soft, fleecy white, with only a black ribbon at the throat. She sat there listless and purposeless. With all her luxurious surroundings the girl was lonely. No father or mother—her dear uncle dead—her cousin away, she knew not where—there were times when the world seemed desolate to the beautiful heiress.

She would have given much gold for one true friend. An elderly maiden aunt had come into the princely house, to fulfill the proprieties and see that the housekeeper did her duty by the servants. But she was not much of a companion to the spirited young beauty. Hosts of admirers would have been only too glad to console her drooping spirits; but Honoria, though fond of conquest and not entirely above the pleasures of coquetry, was not quick to yield her heart or her friendship to people.

She sat there idly pondering what she should do when the summer came—go to the country, the seaside, or shut herself up in this great house, like Marianne in the Moated Grange. There was not so very much enjoyment in going about with only her prim aunt for companion. She was vexing her soul, too, to know what had become of Otis. Not a word had she heard from him since the week after his uncle's death.

The money burned in her hands—the luxuries she enjoyed seemed to her half-stolen. Ah, why did her uncle make such a cruel will? If she could only find some way to evade its pitiless provisions and share her wealth with poor Otis! While she sunk deeper and deeper into reverie, the bell rung, and presently Shackles, the old servant of her uncle, and now factotum in the household, knocked at the door, and being bidden to enter, stated that a young person had answered the advertisement. Why, yes, Miss Appleton had forgotten that she had advertised for a maid.

"Show her in here, Shackles. But only one at a time, please. If more come while I am engaged with her keep them waiting in the servants' hall."

Presently she entered, Shackles closing the door behind her, a young girl, plainly and neatly dressed, who lifted such a pair of violet eyes to the lady's face as surprised her.

For a moment the two women looked at each other with mutual curiosity veiled behind an apparent indifference.

"You do not look fit for any, even the lightest service. Do you really apply for the position of dressing-maid? Have you ever been out as a servant?"

"No, madam, never. And for that reason I am afraid you will not try me. But my mother is dead; and I am not strong enough or wise enough for a teacher. I saw your advertisement, and it seemed to me just the kind of work I might do, after I had once learned it. I don't deny that I shall be awkward and almost useless at first. But I would ask no

wages for the first month; and I would try, oh, so willingly, to please you."

Here was something different from the bold Irish or the pert French maid. Honoria's lonely heart went out toward this little creature, so pretty, so delicate, and ladylike, so modest and evidently so very much in earnest—went out toward her almost as it would have done to a forsaken baby. She reflected that it would be careless, almost wicked, to leave unaided this timid girl, whose loveliness might expose her to all sorts of danger.

"I would as soon think of setting a humming-bird to work," she thought; "but I shall take her all the same. She can, perhaps, do my hair, or mend a bit of lace now and then, just to deceive her with the idea that she is of some use. What a perfectly lovely little thing she is!"—then aloud—"What is your name?"

"Milla."

"Milla what?"

"Lovelace, please, madam."

"Not an Irish name, anyway. Well, Milla, I am willing to give you a trial."

"Oh, thank you!" very gladly and gratefully.

"When can you come?"

"This afternoon. May I send my trunks, Miss Appleton?—and—and—will I have a room to myself?"

"Exacting already," thought the mistress, severely, but she relented when the stranger said, earnestly:

"It is only because I am not one of them, you see, Miss Appleton."

"No, and that may make trouble. I see that I cannot take you as my maid—it would never do."

"Oh!" sighed the young girl, drooping.

"But I will do better by you, Milla. You shall be my companion—then you can take yoar meals in the housekeeper's room, and need not come in contact with the servants."

"I must do something to be useful, though; you must let me earn my bread. And I will not take any wages."

"I will see to that. Come as soon as you please."

So the companion came a few hours later, and she and her two trunks were duly installed in a small room communicating with Miss Appleton's dressing-room.

She was timid, shrinking, far from presumptuous, yet in less than a week the mistress and maid were two girls together. The little companion was so refined and intelligent and so wonderfully pretty, that Honoria lost half her sense of loneliness. She made the little thing her friend and confidante. She said to herself that Milla's coming was one of the most fortunate things that had ever befallen her own proud self. She had some one to talk to now beside the grim aunt—some one young and romantic like herself. The companion's chief duty was to listen to the girlish chatter of her beautiful mistress. She sat beside Miss Appleton when that lady went out for a drive. Honoria insisted in having her elegant cast-off dresses made over by her seamstress for the little companion. Sometimes, of a dreamy, drowsy June afternoon, Milla would read aloud, in her sweet, pathetic voice, poems of love and melody which her lady would select from the great library. Two pairs of beautiful eyes would brighten and grow moist together over the sweet singing of the bards, singing of passion and romance.

Why had Mildred ventured into the home of the Garners? It was a strange freak for one so timid as she.

It was not jealousy which urged her; nor was it the hope of meeting Otis there. Not the girl, so young, so ignorant of life, so shrinking, never forgot that she was Otis Garner's wife. It was the passionate purpose of her life to make herself worthy of him. She knew that she was lacking in many things which could only be acquired by association with those in a sphere far above hers. She knew that Honoria Appleton was not famous for beauty alone, but for wit and elegance.

Mildred's mother had died in March. The

desolate girl's heart had warmed with gratitude toward Mr. Pomeroy, who had rendered every service in his power at that sad time. Believing him to be a true friend she had allowed her gratitude to show itself in a kinder manner toward him; and he—emboldened by his claims on her and by her solitude and unprotected condition, which should have rendered her sacred to him—had made such advances as showed her the real meaning of his attentions and her own danger.

The shock was dreadful. It seemed to her that she must die, now that her husband's friend had dared to offer her his perverted love. Oh, where could she fly? What was she born for? She drove the traitor from her with words which shamed him while they aroused his anger, and a fierce determination that she should yet be humbled, who had so wounded his vanity and disappointed his passion.

Mildred soon became aware that she could not walk abroad without her path being shadowed by that man. She grew more and more afraid of him. She saw that he was bad enough to plot some foul scheme against her. Her dread of him even haunted her dreams at night.

This feeling of insecurity, and the desire—strong as life—to improve herself upon some model she knew Otis admired—had led her to answer Miss Appleton's advertisement.

Little did the haughty Honoria dream that her meek attendant made a study of her every movement, the tones of her voice, the style of her reception of friends and visitors, and all the thousand little polished arts that go to make up a fashionable woman; and that she carefully reformed every habit of her own which did not accord with the usages of the best society.

It was an afternoon in June. There had been a delicious shower about one o'clock, leaving the air cool and sweet with the rifled perfume of millions of roses.

"How lovely it must be in the country," remarked the little companion to the fair lady.

"Yes; it is time we were going to the country, Milla. We will drive out to Cambridge, anyhow, and get a glimpse of green fields and waving trees."

The carriage, an elegant open barouche, from which they could have an unobstructed view, was ordered around, and mistress and maid went out to enjoy the soft air and the approaching sunset in the suburbs. Not until they were over the bridge and under the classic elms of Cambridge did Mildred venture to lift the thick vail she always wore when out, and to inhale the breath of roses "new-washed with dew." They had a long, delightful drive, watching the sun sink into a golden fleece of clouds, and look out from under, like a laughing child playing Bo-peep; and were now driving back at a pretty rapid rate, so as to reach the city before dark, when a gentleman, walking along the pavement near the University buildings, held up his finger to the coachman, who drew up his horses, and the gentleman came to the side of the carriage.

"Oh, is it you, Mr. Pomeroy?"

"None other, Miss Appleton. Ten thousand pardons for taking the liberty of stopping your barouche! I only want to ask after your health, and to say that I certainly should have called upon you this week, but I had an impression that you were gone to Newport," saying all this with that easy, elegant air of his, and darting an inquiring glance at the veiled person sitting beside Miss Appleton.

"I have enough sea-air in Boston, Mr. Pomeroy. When I go away it will not be to Newport, but to the mountains. I think the middle of July will be soon enough."

"Would you believe it of me, Miss Appleton? I have actually walked out here, the afternoon was so delightful. Having made a call on my friend, the poet-professor, I am now on my return. Is it not a delicious evening?"

"Yes. I have been feasting on lilies and roses. But, surely, Mr. Pomeroy, you have

carried your experiment of walking far enough! If you will accept, you shall have a seat in my carriage back to the Tremont."

"Ah, Miss Appleton, what a talent you have for reading a man's inmost thoughts! When I held up my finger to John, here, I said to myself, 'What a happy ending to a pleasant little excursion to be invited by Miss Appleton to enjoy the heaven of her society for a half-hour or so!' I never did despise a silver-lined carriage. You remember what Holmes says:

'Little I ask, my wants are few.'

"Oh, yes, responded Honoria, laughing, "I remember—the poet only wanted a hut—of brown stone—a few railroad shares—cold victuals, like vanilla-ice:

'One good-sized diamond in a pin,
Some, *not so large*, in rings.'

By this time the horses were again *en route*, and Brummell Pomeroy—who, of all men on earth, had the finest art of *sponging* the good things of this life—lolled luxuriously back against the satin cushion, and chatted gayly with his beautiful companion; darting, at the same time, keen glances at the little person, who had quickly thrown her thick vail over her face when she first saw him approach the carriage, and had quietly slipped over on to the front seat, before he entered, giving him the place beside Miss Appleton.

Of course Brummell knew, from her not being introduced and from her taking the seat she did, that this was some humble companion of the lady's, whom, in her kindness, she had taken out to ride; but there was something strangely familiar about the little figure and its graceful movements, which aroused his suspicions.

He made himself so extremely agreeable to Honoria that, before they reached the Tremont House, she had invited him to take tea with her—an invitation which he eagerly accepted—eagerly, for two reasons. The first reason was that he had some time ago made up his mind to bend all his powers to securing the heiress, and had chanced out in Cambridge for no other reason, but because he happened to see her carriage on the bridge; the other was that his curiosity about the little veiled figure in front of him was growing deeper every moment.

By what little slips is it that great secrets often come out! Mildred, sitting there, mute and trembling, with her blue vail pinned tightly over her plain hat, had, carelessly, in the heat of the afternoon, drawn off her gloves; and, lifting her hand to settle her vail still more securely, thoughtlessly betrayed the ring which glittered on her fourth finger. Brummell knew the ring at a glance. Little Mildred's wedding-ring!

Ha! This was a strange turn of affairs!

The little creature had fled from him—hidden herself from his heartless pursuit—but, of all things, *why* in the house of her husband's cousin—the house of the Garners? It was a question which, with all his sagacity, Brummell Pomeroy could not answer.

Hence his eagerness to be asked to tea.

It was very kind of Miss Appleton to give him an opportunity of solving the mystery, and he meant to solve it before he left the house. What if this poor girl, to whom he had betrayed his true character, should be the means of losing him the rich heiress?

He set his teeth at the thought of it.

"I would murder her, sooner than that!" he thought.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CASTLE BESIEGED.

"WHAT a pretty little girl that was with you in the carriage," remarked Mr. Pomeroy to Miss Appleton, over whose brilliant face fell the soft luster of a cluster of wax candles, which candles also illuminated the very charming and costly Japanese tea-set and the tempting tea on the little table set for only two—for, fortunately—or so Brummell thought—the maiden aunt had retired with a headache,

there were no other visitors, and he was *tete-a-tete* with the object of his affections (!)

"Did you see her face?" asked Honoria, as she pinned back in its place the white rose which had dropped from her bosom. "She is such a timid little thing, I wonder that you got a glimpse of her through that blue veil. Yes, she is pretty, and modest and intelligent, too. I like her."

"I know it is a piece of impertinence on my part, but, may I be impudent, and ask what position she fills as a member of your household, Miss Appleton?"

"Ah, I see! You are slighted because you were not introduced!"

"I confess to a deep interest in pretty girls."

"Well, my little Milla is enough of a lady to be worthy of introduction to my friends. But it would not do. She is only a 'companion,' and the conversative would take offense."

"Perhaps you have some special reason for favoring her—perhaps she has a right to be recognized by society," said Pomeroy, keeping his sharp eyes fixed on the beautiful face opposite.

Honoria laughed girlishly, and her clear eyes met his unreservedly as she answered:

"What an idea! The only claim she has on me, is, that I like her. I am lonely in this great house, and she is young, like myself, and good company for me. Little Milla applied for the honor of being my dressing-maid, when she had never performed any such service. I thought I might as well break a butterfly to the wheel! But I took a fancy to her and so I made her a sort of companion. Sometimes she reads to me; once she mended a piece of lace—but the hardest part of her onerous duties is to talk to me and amuse me."

"Fortunate Milla! I would peril my life for the mere chance of obtaining her place, Miss Appleton! You are wasting your sweetness on desert air. Do, do, say that sometimes your unworthy servant may aspire to take Milla's place—may come and amuse you."

He said this with such an affectation of deep earnestness that Honoria laughed again:

"You do amuse me," she said.

"And I *may* come and talk to you sometimes?"

"Why you do, do you not?"

"Yes, but oftener. I would like to make it the serious business of my life to amuse you," half-jestingly, and yet throwing so much tenderness into his voice that she blushed and busied herself with the little gold tongs in the sugar-bowl, as she answered him:

"I hope I shall not care so much for mere amusement when I'm older. I mean to be useful in some way; ('Ay, to pay my bills!' thought Brummell) but I'm such a child, now, and it really is lonesome in this great house since—since—I lost—my dear uncle," the tears springing as ready as the blush—("and your cousin, too, perhaps," thought the man of the world who watched her).

Brummell was too wise to push his suit too rapidly; he knew that young heiresses are sometimes as shy as quail in June, and he had no wish to alarm this one; so he went on with the first subject.

"Then you know nothing of the antecedents of this very interesting and much-to-be-envied companion of yours? You must be cautious, Miss Appleton, in whom you put confidence."

"I am—very cautious," archly. "But no one need fear little Milla. She is innocence itself."

"Has she never told you her history?"

"Oh, yes, the most of it, I think. Her father was a clerk, and never got to anything beyond that. He was pretty well educated, and so was her mother. They lived very nicely, but economically, until he died; of course, the salary came to a sudden stop. All the ready money went in funeral expenses; the shock of his death made her mother ill; Milla, who was going to school and studying music, had to give up her lessons at twelve years of age. Since then she has learned nothing but what she has taught herself. She plays and sings very sweetly; but not at all scientifically. In March

last her mother died; she could not very well support herself and keep their rooms; so the poor little thing thought the best thing she could do was to give up her three music-scholars, and answer my advertisement for a maid."

"Thank you. A very pretty little bit of biography—from such lips—a little dull, perhaps, from any other. These are wonderful tea-cups, Miss Appleton; can you give me *their history?*" And—having changed the subject after convincing himself that his companion had no idea, thus far, of *who* this girl was—he proceeded to do his best to please, and entertain, and fascinate the smiling young beauty, the superb mistress of all this wealth whose evidences lay all about him in the costly appointments of the lofty room and the exquisite table.

But his thoughts were often *distract*. He could not forget that the girl whom he had done his worst to injure, and who had fled from his persecutions, was an inmate of this house, and might very justly resolve to betray him, when she found he was a friend of Miss Appleton. Perhaps this very night she would tell her story to her kind mistress. He saw no way to prevent it. He beat his brains in a vain attempt to invent some way of communicating with Mildred, but could think of none that would be safe. He knew very well that she would keep out of his sight. He dare not attempt to bribe a servant to take her a note—he was too experienced in guile to compromise himself in any such way as that. So that what should have been a most delightful evening was spoiled utterly for him. He took an early leave, immediately after which Honoria flew up stairs to her own room where Mildred sat doing a piece of embroidery, to confide to her companion that she had often heard her cousin Otis praise Mr. Pomeroy, and that he was a most delightful fellow, "and, oh, would you believe it, Milla, he actually *almost* made love to me!"

Milla looked gravely into the beautiful, flushed face.

"I hope he never will come any nearer to it," she said.

"Why? What is the matter with you?" asked her young mistress, all the haughtiness of the Garner blood flashing into her face.

"I am sorry. It is not my place to receive impressions or to seek to benefit you by them, if I do. I spoke too hastily."

"No, you did *not*!" cried Honoria, her sudden temper subsiding. "If you had an impression of this flattering gallant, let me hear it, please, little one. I am not so pleased with him as you think, though it is fun to listen to the nice things he has to say!—but I know cousin Otis admired him."

"I should say—if you will make me, Miss Appleton—that the gentleman who rode with us this afternoon is not a person of any principle. I should suspect, if he made love to you, that he was a fortune-hunter. And I should be afraid, if you married him, that he would make you unhappy."

"Oh, mercy, child! How serious you are! You really make my blood run cold! But never mind, do not fret about me. I am in no danger of this terrible fate. My heart is already given away, Milla, would you believe it? Given away, and broken, too! Think of that! Sometime if you and I get to be fast friends, I will tell you all about it—for it's hard to have no one to talk to when one's heart aches so, Milla. I could never tell any one *but* you. You are so sweet and so beguiling, it will come out, to you, some day."

She spoke quickly and gayly, yet the tears sprung to her eyes. Mildred saw them and her own heart began to beat wildly. Oh, what was this that this beautiful girl was going to tell her? That she, too, loved Otis Garner?—and that he loved her? Could she bear to have this said to *her*—his wife—who worshiped "the least sound of his foot on the stairway"—the least word he had ever spoken to her, the least gift he had ever given her? Could she bear to live and feel that she was the obstacle between these two cousins who were so worthy

of each other? Oh, how mean, and poor, and humble she felt beside this dark, proud girl, who showered gold about her as the rose showers dew!

"But I cannot give him up to her; I am his wife: I cannot give him up while I live," moaned poor Mildred, silently. "There is but one thing I can do, that is, to die. Yes, I may be a suicide, yet; I, whom my mother tried to make a Christian girl." Rising, she said "good-night" to her mistress, and retreated to her own little room.

Meantime, Brummell Pomeroy, restless and guilty, hung about the mansion he had so lately quitted. He felt as if he could not go without an interview with Mildred, or contriving to send her a message. Taking his pencil and note-book he paused by a street-lamp and wrote a note, which he tore out of his book, and then resumed his promenade up and down the street.

The Garner mansion stood apart from its aristocratic fellows, in a haughty seclusion of its own, in the center of quite a plot of ground, so that there were windows on every side looking down on the north on a sheet of emerald velvet grass, and on the south on long, narrow beds of flowers. Brummell observed lights in two of the rooms on the second floor, on the south side of the house. While he passed and repassed, some one came to the window of the rear room; a shadow fell for a moment—he recognized it!

"That is Mildred's bed-room," he said to himself.

Again and again he walked up and down; after a while the lights were out all over the house, except the one which always burned in the hall. He heard Shackles locking up, and going about to see that all the lower windows were fastened. The window to Mildred's room above remained open, for it was a warm night. The thoughtless girl had left the shutters open, also. Brummell watched until the policeman was at the furthest end of his beat, slipped into the yard, and along by the beds of flowers which were perfuming the night air, and threw into the window the note he had written, and which he had wrapped about some pebbles which he took from the flower-beds. He made sure that it had fallen inside, then slipped out, and away, to his hotel, before the watchman had completed his round.

Mildred was sitting in the dark by the window, still far too agitated to think of sleeping. The note fell directly into her lap. She gave a little smothered cry. Recovering herself she picked up the intruding object. There was light enough for her to see that it was a half sheet of note paper wrapped about something—and her first thought as ever was—Otis.

Perhaps Otis had seen her in this house and took this way of communicating with her. She never thought of the man who had sat opposite her in the carriage that afternoon. Drawing down the curtain she re-lighted the gas, and with trembling fingers and hurried pulses, smoothed out the crushed paper. This is what it contained:

"Your husband lives in Cambridge. He is preparing several boys for college, and lives very retired. It was to see him that I went out this afternoon. He inquired after you. Of course I could tell him nothing, as I then knew nothing. If you wish to see him, enough to risk a trip with me to C. to-morrow, be at the corner of the block in the afternoon at five o'clock, where I will meet you with a carriage, and take you to see him. You need not be afraid of me, as I have now a more serious suit to which I am devoting all my attention."

CHAPTER XII.

STRAIGHT INTO THE SNARE.

I AM tired, tired, tired of everything!" exclaimed Honoria, on the following morning, as she sauntered idly out of the breakfast-room and met her companion in the hall, who had finished her breakfast some time before and now stood looking up at the lovely face of a statue of Psyche who held a flaming torch at the foot of the grand staircase.

Mildred started, when she was addressed, like some guilty creature. She was pale, for

contending fears and desires had deprived her of sleep, and looked sad; but she said, very gently:

"What can I do to rest you, Miss Appleton?"

"Come in the music-room here. It is cool, and the air wafted up from the flower-beds is delicious. Aunt Esther wants me to go shopping with her—but I will not desecrate such a June morning as this by spending it in shops—not I! Yet I am just as tired of this wearisome world as if it were not summer, and there were no roses peeping over that sill, there. It is I, you see, Milla, who am so tiresome. I can't get away from myself!" and, with a tragic sigh, the young beauty threw herself down, in the most indolently graceful of attitudes, into the arms of a *fauteuil* whose pale-gold satin cushions set off her dusky hair and brooding, languorous, dusky eyes and peachy-pale olive complexion to the best advantage.

The poor companion looked at her beautiful mistress with a strange, wistful expression:

"It is so singular," she said, "to hear you call this a wearisome world! I thought it was only the *poor* who found it so."

Honoraria smiled bitterly, as if she knew better than that.

"I will read you something out of this, Miss Appleton," said the companion, picking up a small volume of blue-and-gold which had strayed into the music-room. The book opened in her hand of itself to a page bearing two verses.

The girls made a fair picture in the cool, shadowed room, the breath of roses blowing in through summer curtains, and the rare old picture of St. Cecilia looking down on them from over the grand piano. It would be hard to say which was the prettiest of the two—the stylish mistress, in her soft, fine morning-dress of India muslin, her dark hair falling in *negligé* over her shoulders, and no jewels but rose-buds at brow and breast, caprice, languor, dissatisfaction, and a half-scornful interest in the words of the poem, revealed in her face; or the delicate, flower-like young companion, sitting near the window, a stray beam of sunlight glinting on her golden hair which shadowed her neck and cheek as she bent her pure, pensive face over the little volume, while her voice, soft, low and pathetic, trembled through the music of the verses. These were Tennyson's little poem:

THE BEGGAR-MAID.

Her arms across her breast she laid;
She was more fair than words can say
Barefooted came the beggar-maid
Before the King Cophetua.
In robe and crown, the king stepped down,
To meet and greet her on the way;
"It is no wonder," said the lords,
"She is more beautiful than day."

As shines the moon in clouded skies,
She in her poor attire was seen:
One praised her ankles, one her eyes,
One her dark hair and lovesome mien.
So sweet a face, such angel grace,
In all that land had never been;
Cophetua swore a royal oath:
"This beggar-maid shall be my queen!"

"Such things never happen in real life," remarked the reader, dropping the book listlessly in her lap.

Something in her voice attracted Honoria's attention, who looked curiously into the melancholy, drooping face, and then said, with a light laugh:

"Sometimes. I have heard of similar cases!" Perhaps this brought before her the image of her reckless cousin who had married a beggar-maid, off-hand. She sighed, after her little burst of laughter, and fell into deep thought. After a few minutes she looked up, saying:

"I wish I were poor, Milla."

"Oh, don't say that! You were never poor, of course, or you would not wish it. If I were placed where you are I should be the very happiest creature alive!" and Milla clasped her hands while the burning color rushed into her pale cheeks.

"And I am the most miserable!" cried Honoria, suddenly, and large tears began to roll down her face.

"I don't know why I should tell this to you, Milla—only that my heart is breaking and I must speak to some one. Yes, I am really, really very wretched. And what do you think makes me so? Oddly enough, it is this very money that you wish you had! I hate it! It is making me so much trouble that I wish it were in the bottom of the sea. Now, Milla, if I tell you this, you must never breathe a word to any living soul."

"I have no one to tell it to, madam."

"Did you ever hear anything said about my uncle's will?"

"Not much," answered the little companion, with drooping face.

"It was in the papers—all about his leaving everything to me. I did not know but that you might have seen it. Well, Milla, there was another person who had a better right to the property than I. I was not brought up to expect any more than a small slice of it. For the larger portion was to be my cousin's. You must understand that, as a young man, he had a right to expect more than I, a girl; and uncle had always openly avowed that Otis was the principal heir. He used to say, laughing, that there was but one way for me to share equally—and that was—to marry—my cousin."

"Yes," panted the listener, whose burning eyes were fixed eagerly upon the blushing, conscious face.

"But I did not love him in those days," Honoria ran on, dreamily. "I did not know my own heart. I coquetted with my cousin, and teased him, until one day it came out that he had done—he had always been a little wild—a terrible thing."

"A terrible thing!" echoed the listener, in a low voice.

"He had made a foolish bet at his club, lost it, and went out on the street, pledged to marry the first girl, under twenty, whom he met. He redeemed his word. He met a beggar-girl, and he married her."

"He should not have done it," murmured the poor companion, "for the girl's sake as well as his own, he should not have done it."

"You are right, Milla. But I have no room in my heart to pity the girl; she should not have taken up with such an offer. Well, when it came to the ears of his uncle my cousin was disinherited—driven out, penniless, to earn his bread, who knew no more how to work for wages than a child. He left this luxurious home which you see, and went—no one knows where. Then, when my uncle died suddenly, last winter, instead of having softened toward poor Otis, he had not only left everything to me; but there is a clause in the will which forbids me to share anything with my cousin. If I make him the smallest gift we both of us lose the estate, which then goes to a distant relative. Imagine how I am situated! I tell you, Milla, it is slowly but surely driving me frantic—mad! I never sit down to our sumptuous dinners—I never ride out in our elegant carriages—I never take my ease in these rich apartments that I do not feel like a thief—yes, like a thief, Milla!—robbing my cousin of what is really his own. And the thought of his privations—of what his proud spirit must suffer—of the actual want he may be enduring—is it not enough, is it not enough to keep me wretched?"

"Then you love him?" was the singular reply to this agitated question, and the blue eyes, darkening and deepening, were bent piercingly on the glowing, tear-wet face of her mistress.

"Milla! That is too much to say! I dare not ask myself that question—for my cousin is a married man. He told me last Christmas—the only time I have seen him since he was driven forth from his home—that he had never lived with this wife of his—that he did not, never would love her—but she is his wife, and so long as she remains so it would be wicked, wicked, for me to say or think what you have said. Surely any one, with a heart or a conscience, would be unhappy to be placed as I am. It is not necessary that I should love my cousin to feel his wrongs. Why, child, you are

as pale as death! Are you fainting? What is the matter?"

"It must be the heat—I did not sleep last night," gasped Mildred, on whose soul the words—"that he did not, never would love her"—had fallen like ice and fire. She made a desperate effort—oh, never must this proud Honoria learn her secret now—and forced a smile to her ashy lips.

"Poor lady!" she whispered, "you are not so much to be envied, after all! No, no, I do not wonder that you are not contented. One so noble, so generous as you, can never be happy while conscious that she wrongs another; no, not even when she is the helpless instrument of another's revenge."

This she said, by a great effort, to divert Miss Appleton's attention from her own uncontrollable emotion.

Then she arose from the seat she had taken at her mistress' feet, got the book of poems again, and forced herself to read "Locksley Hall" in a quivering, palpitating voice, sweet and sad as the moaning of an *Aeolian* harp, setting the passionate heart-cry of the words to the thrilling music of her pathetic voice.

Honoria listened to the poem, with bright tears beading her long, black, silken eye-lashes, and grew a little less bitter in her mood. As soon as possible Mildred laid the book down and slipped away to her own room, where she walked up and down, pressing her hands to her heart, and repeating, "never did, never could love me!" over and over.

When she had risen, after a sleepless night, that morning, she had still been undecided whether to trust herself to one so treacherous as she knew Brummell Pomeroy to be. Fear of him alternated with a passionate desire to see the man who stood in so strange a relation to her.

Now she was resolved to risk whatever danger there might be; a wild impulse to stand face to face with Otis Garner, and ask him to tell her, truly, if indeed he could never love her—and if he says so, thought the deserted wife, "then—there is water enough in Charles river to drown me."

She had traveled already so far on the path of despair that she was thinking of suicide as a relief.

That afternoon Mildred came down, dressed for the street, in a simple blue muslin and plain straw hat, tied with a blue ribbon, and asked permission of Miss Appleton to be gone a couple of hours. Honoria noticed that her little maid wore neat gray kid gloves and the cunningest of kid boots.

"She has good taste," thought the mistress; "she dresses like a lady, though her toilette is so inexpensive;" and, "you look like some sweet little girl, Milla. Give me a kiss, and take good care of yourself," she said, before she let her go.

"How can you spoil that chit by being so free with her?" asked the prudent aunt, when the companion had shut the hall-door behind her. Honoria never asked herself such a serious question as that.

Mildred, pale and trembling, walked down to the corner of the next street at precisely five o'clock. Two minutes later a little phaeton, all gilt and glitter, drew up beside the curb. Mr. Pomeroy, attired in his noted elegant style, himself drove the two black ponies attached to the dashing little open carriage. He sprang out when he saw Mildred, offering his hand to assist her in.

"Oh! Mr. Pomeroy, must we go in this?" she asked, shrinking.

"Not good enough for Otis Garner's wife, eh?" he replied, laughing.

"You know what I mean. It is too conspicuous," and Mildred looked as if about to run away.

"Not at all. I shall be proud of my fair companion. Otis may be ashamed of you, but I am not."

Mildred flushed with indignation at the latter part of this speech; but the wild cry of her heart to see Otis, overcame even her resentment, and her dislike of observation, and she

stepped into the phaeton. As she seated herself she drew the everlasting blue veil over her face.

Brummell, taking his place by her side, suddenly, and as if by accident, sent the veil sailing off on the wind.

"Oh, my veil!"

"Never mind it. It's very unbecoming to you, little Mildred, and it's not worth my running after."

So saying, Brummell spoke to his fiery little ponies, and they were off down the street like a summer breeze.

Mildred was so distressed at the loss of her sheltering veil that she could hardly repress her tears. It seemed to her, too, as if Mr. Pomeroy took the most frequented streets, and that he bowed to every second person he met.

That he had a devilish purpose in doing this she did not suspect; but she felt very awkward and out of place—very uncomfortable and ready to cry, as she sat by his side, while he bowed, right and left, to his fashionable acquaintances.

CHAPTER XIII.

"EVERY MAN'S HAND AGAINST HIM."

On the morning after that Christmas frolic on the ice, which had ended so disastrously, Pentacket experienced the severest mental shock—followed by the wildest excitement—which it had ever been the fate of that good little town to endure.

The first person who chanced to be crossing the river at about the spot where the schoolmaster was supposed to have skated into an air-hole, made a strange discovery. In the first place it must be explained that the air-hole was not caused by the air seeking exit through a thin place in the ice; it had been cut through ice eighteen inches thick by the farmers of that vicinity that they might obtain water for their cattle; consequently, a person could approach to the brink.

The farmer, who came early that morning to dip water from the river, and who had not then even heard of the accident of the previous night, observed three things which caused him to look about him in surprise and apprehension. The first was blood—blood along a trail of about a rod, ending at the hole; the second was a bloody pocket-knife, thrown off into the alder-bushes along the bank; the third was, on the very edge of the ice, almost falling into the water, a man's fur-trimmed kid glove.

With a prudence which did him credit, the farmer touched nothing, but went directly to two or three of his neighbors; and these, in turn, sent for the town constable, who took the knife and the glove in charge, and scooped up some of the red drops from the ice, that Dr. Bolus might experiment with them, and say whether or not they were drops of human blood.

Ruth Fletcher had risen from her bed that morning looking like the ghost of the blooming girl of yesterday. She was deadly pale, there were dark circles about her eyes, and the eyes themselves had a shifting look of terror—and something different from mere terror—pitiful to see. None of the family had retired until long after one o'clock, the sad news of the schoolmaster's probable death having shocked them too greatly to permit them to think of rest for some hours. They had all liked Mr. Otis, and the fact that he had left their own fireside alive and well such a short time before, made the accident seem very distressing to them.

No one thought it strange that Ruth showed the effects of the shock so plainly. She had been a favorite pupil of the teacher's and he had been a visitor at her father's house. Such of the neighbors as dropped in to discuss the event expected to find that Ruth Fletcher took it pretty hard.

Several of these were in the sitting-room talking over the affair again and again in its every slightest known or inferred particular—while Ruth, with cold hands clenched together

in her lap, stared into the fire as if she heard nothing—when a knot of girls, with two or three young fellows, rushed into the house pell-mell.

"Do you know what has happened?" cried the foremost.

"No," answered Mrs. Fletcher, while Ruth turned her head, gazing at them with strange, wide-open eyes.

"They have found blood on the ice, and a glove. The glove belonged to Mr. Otis—you know those gloves, Ruth, with the fur band at the wrist—but *who do* you think the *knife* belongs to? Jasper Judson's initials are cut on handle, and we've all of us seen him with a knife like this one. Now, what do you think of that?"

Ruth arose to her feet and faced them. She was white as snow, and her eyes burned with a terrible look.

"It only proves what I told him last night," she said, in a high, thrilling voice. "I told Jasper Judson that he had murdered him—and now you all know it as well as I"—after saying which she fell down on the floor unconscious.

When she came out of the dead faint into which she had fallen it was evident that her mind was affected; she was ill, and was taken to her room, where she lay for weeks raving in the delirium of brain fever.

Before sunset of that day a warrant was issued for the arrest of Jasper Judson for the murder of Henry Otis; and the sheriff, with a heavy heart, took his way to the hitherto happy home of Squire Judson, whose pride, ambition, hope were all wrapped up in his only boy. A thunderbolt which should tear his hearthstone from under his feet could not have so appalled the squire, as did the call of the officer who was sorry enough to make his errand known. Mrs. Judson ordered the sheriff out of her house in her anger and indignation. He was very gentle with her, but he made her understand that he had no choice but to look the house over for her son.

"He is gone," she then said. "He took the black team and the light cutter just before noon and drove off as if he were possessed. I thought he had gone to take Ruth Fletcher out riding," and then the poor mother sunk into a chair and wept and moaned—it had come over her, "all in a flash," how Jasper had behaved all the morning!

He would not have any breakfast; and had been seen by his father, sitting on an old sled behind the barn, his face buried in his hands and his shoulders drooped; so that the squire had come in and said to her: "He was afraid Ruth had given the boy the mitten he seemed so down in the mouth." And then he had taken their best span of horses, just before noon-dinner, and without eating a morsel, had driven away at full speed.

"If he's gone, he's run away, that's all," said the sheriff. "I shall have to telegraph all about him to have him arrested wherever he is."

But the officer was mistaken in his very natural inference; Jasper had not run away; just as the sheriff was about leaving, with the two aids he had placed at the front and back doors, the young man of whom he was in search dashed up to the porch on which he was standing—with the splendid blacks all astir and foaming at the mouth, they had been driven so hard—flung the reins over their backs, leaped out of the cutter, and touched his fur cap politely to the visitor.

That gallant salute, and the clear way in which Jasper's eyes seemed to inquire of him the reason of his visit, made it very embarrassing work for the officer, whose face flushed and whose voice trembled, as he clapped his hand on the handsome young fellow's shoulder, saying:

"You are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner! I should like to know what for?"

Jasper's tone was as haughty as any that ever issued from the aristocratic lips of the city schoolmaster.

"For the murder of Henry Otis."

"His murder? His *murder*? I thought it was well known and proven that he slipped into an air-hole in skating, and that there was no one at hand to help him."

"So it was thought last night. But things have come to light to-day which justify the citizens in asking for a warrant for your arrest."

"Who accuses me?"

As we have said, the sheriff pitied the parents and his prisoner; perhaps the very attempt to justify his own course, then, urged him to make the cruelest possible reply.

"Ruth Fletcher was the first to put the general suspicion into words. She says that she knew, last night, that you had killed Mr. Otis out of hate and revenge."

"Ruth said that?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say she did; and I'm more sorry to think, Jasper, that jealousy of any man should have led you to such a crime. There isn't a gal on earth is worth it," moralized the constable. "And now, see, what a box you've got yourself into. I'd rather be tied up and whipped than lay a hand on you, Jasper; but I must do my duty."

Not a word of reply did Jasper make; not a particle of resistance, as the three men surrounded him. He did not even look back at his moaning mother, who stood in the door wringing her hands; but stepped into the sleigh provided for him, and allowed himself to be driven into town and up to the door of the jail, which he entered without turning his head to the left or right, or seeming to feel any emotion.

The next day when his father sent the best lawyer of the county to consult with the prisoner on a line of defense, Jasper simply repeated the story he had told when he returned to the spectators, after his race on the ice with Otis.

"You need not trouble to get up any defense of me," he said, to the lawyer, indifferently. "I would as lief be hanged as not. Indeed, under the circumstances, I think I would rather prefer hanging to living."

"You will have to remain here in this cell until the first of June, anyway, Judson. Court does not sit until then—the fall term adjourned not long ago. You will have some time to decide whether you really want to defend yourself or not. I will not hurry you. You will feel differently in a few days."

But Jasper did not seem to have changed his mind at the end of a few days—or weeks. The square set of his lips grew more decided; the resolute, almost dogged look in his deep gray eyes never changed; he did not deny; he did not complain; he did not open his heart to any one—not even to the heart-broken mother who came every day to spend an hour with him; and she, he knew, in common with the rest of the world, believed him guilty. Yes, Mrs. Judson believed her son guilty, because of his strange conduct the day of his arrest, and because of his bearing since.

She forgave him and yearned over him as a mother will; she said to herself that the boy had always a quick temper, and that the schoolmaster must have provoked him in some intolerable manner.

January and February dragged slowly along. Much search had been made for the murdered man's body down at the mill-dam, where it was thought it would go over and be found below, where the water was too rapid for ice to form.

When it was not discovered there it was concluded that it had caught against and been held under the ice by some snag, or the long roots of the elm reaching out from the bank.

It would be a hopeless task to cut away a half-mile of two-foot ice; and so public anxiety and expectation were fain to wait until the warm spring rains should break up the ice and bring the ghastly proofs of murder to light.

Of course if the body should be found to bear a knife-wound, the proof would be clear enough against young Judson.

"The wind-flower and the violet,"

were struggling through the moss in the brown old woods about Pentacket—the snow had melted from the hills and gleamed only here and there in the hollows—the stems of the willows along the river wore a bright gold, and little crimson tufts were showing all over the maples—the sound of running waters filled the April nights with music—when Ruth Fletcher came out of the brain fever which had held her for three months, more dead than alive, and looked up feebly in her mother's face with hollow eyes of recognition.

During the muttered delirium which had held her so long, she had constantly been the accuser of Jasper Judson. The story of her love-affairs in broken, wild, incoherent babblings, was told over and over; and pieced together by those who watched over her sick bed.

"Jasper was angry—angry—because I threw his ring away!" she had cried, tossing her head from side to side, and staring with the bright eyes of fever from one to another face.

The ring thus referred to by the delirious girl, was found after some weeks, where she had flung it away that fatal night, and was taken as proof positive that she was telling facts in her ravings.

And so it was that Ruth was, from the very first moment when she denounced him, the worst enemy of the young man who loved her with all the strength of his powerful nature.

The delicate trailing arbutus was perfuming the moist forest nooks when Ruth came out of the long and weary confusion of madness, and looked once more consciously upon the things about her in the room where she had lain as close a prisoner as Jasper in his cell.

For several moments her large eyes, now sunken in her wasted face, looked quietly at her mother and around upon the familiar objects of her bed-chamber. When her lips moved her whisper was so faint that Mrs. Fletcher had to bend her ear close to listen.

"Why are you here, mother? Have Mr. Otis and David got back from school yet? Is anything the matter with me?"

She had yet to endure, weak as she was, the shock of returning memory—of dreadful knowledge. Her mother spoke to her very soothingly, and was telling her that she had been ill for a little while, when Ruth suddenly cried, "Oh!" and began to weep so desperately that it was feared that the wasted chord of life would snap outright under the strain of memory and grief.

CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE RIVER AT MIDNIGHT.

MILDRED was inexpressibly relieved when they were finally beyond the precincts of the crowded city; still it was not much better in Cambridge, and the hour was just that charming one before tea when every one was out.

"Mr. Pomeroy, where is Mr. Garner? It seems to me as if we had been up and down every street in Cambridge," she asked, at last, as the golden light of the setting sun striking under the arches of the roadside elms warned her that it would be late—very late—when they should reach Miss Appleton's, on their return, after her promised interview with her husband.

"He is to meet us at Mrs. Miller's, where we are all three to have ices, and then I am to drive away for a half-hour, leaving him at liberty to talk with you. It is now precisely the hour when we were to arrive—and here we are at Miller's."

The phaeton drew up before a little place, renowned among students for its delicious creams and water-ices; Pomeroy called a boy to hold the horses, lifted his companion out—paused, an instant, to look at her in a sort of wonder to behold the change which had come over her pale, cold face; a change like that over some exquisite landscape, when some somber cloud is lifted and the sweet sunshine suddenly illuminates it—and escorted her into the place, leading her well back to the further end of the

room, and choosing a table which overlooked a little garden in the rear.

Mildred cast her shining, expectant eyes about—a few people were eating ices, here and there, but Otis, evidently, had not yet arrived.

"It's curious that Garner should be late—on such an occasion," remarked Brummell, after they were seated. "We will wait a few moments before ordering our ices," and he rattled on in a gay style about various light subjects, to which Mildred, growing every moment more pale and listless, made little or no response; for, indeed, she heard scarcely anything he said—eyes, ears, heart were absorbed in the watch for her dilatory husband. Ten minutes having passed Brummell wound up an elegant criticism upon the manners of American girls in public places with the sudden observation:

"I do believe Otis has played us a trick, after all! We may as well order what we are to have; and if he does not put in an appearance by the time we have finished our ices, why, there will be nothing to choose—we must get back to the city in good time."

"Yes—yes, indeed! We must hasten our return, Mr. Pomeroy. I did not notice how late it was growing. I do not care for an ice—indeed, indeed, I prefer to go now." Poor Mildred, so absorbed in watching for Otis, just began to realize that twilight was deepening without.

But Pomeroy gayly insisted on the ices; and, not to attract too much attention to herself and her uneasiness, the girl choked down a few spoonfuls, while hoping, wildly hoping to the last, that Otis would keep his appointment.

The disappointment was terrible; but she dared not let her spirits or strength fail her, as they threatened to do—she must get home first. She looked so pale and faint that Pomeroy offered her his arm on the way back to the carriage, and she was obliged to accept it. Still no thought of treachery on her companion's part had occurred to her. As he assisted her into the phaeton some one passed along the pavement, with a slow step and head sunk on his breast.

As she seated herself Mildred caught sight of his face, pale under the light of twilight skies.

"Otis!" she cried, with a voice that was almost a scream of joy.

He turned quickly, took a step toward the carriage, stopped, cast a look of contempt at the pale, beautiful face leaning toward him—a look of scorn, anger and surprise at his old friend, Brummell, who touched his hat gracefully, threw a half-dollar to the boy who had held his horses, took the reins and drove gallantly away, but not before Garner had resumed his walk without making any response to his salutation.

"Oh, stay! stay!" cried Mildred, clutching at the reins, wild with despair. "He meant to be there! He was only a little late! Let us go back. We must go back!"

"He would not speak to us if we did, my little lady. Did you not notice his grand air of scorn of such people as you and I? He is angry to see you with me."

"Then I must get out, and explain it to him. I am going to jump, Mr. Pomeroy, if it kills me."

He slipped a firm arm about her waist, while he urged his team into a rapid trot.

"Little fool, be quiet—he is far out of sight, and you would never find him. I want to tell you something. Listen. Your husband never made an appointment to meet you. It was altogether an accident our meeting him, as we did, just now. I told you a little story, fair one, to induce you to come out riding with me this pleasant summer afternoon. I wanted to get you in my power. Not to make love to you, as I was once inclined to do; but to have it in my power to injure you, if it should become necessary. Hundreds of my friends and acquaintances have seen you with me this afternoon. They do not know your name; but you are pretty enough to pique their curiosity.

They will inquire about you and I will tell them you are the wife whom poor Otis Garner married, on a wager, and deserted. They will wonder why a *married lady* went out with me—took ices at Miller's with me—they will think you gay and careless, to say the least, for a person placed in a position demanding so much prudence as yours. You see, what your husband suspected the instant he saw us over in Cambridge together. He took it for granted there was a flirtation going on. Others will look at it in the same light.

"Now I do not desire to use this power which my little *ruse* has given me, except under certain circumstances. I came to visit Miss Appleton and I found you installed in her house without her suspecting who you are. You do not like me. You have no reason to. You can tell Miss Appleton things which will damage me in her eyes. Now, I have taken a fancy to that superb young lady. I have done more than that—I have made up my mind to marry her. I like her and I like her money; the money which her spiteful old uncle was so considerate as to take away from the nephew for marrying *you*, and so good as to give to the niece. I propose to enter into a contract with you that we shall let each other alone. You must promise me not to interfere with my suit—not to betray to Miss Appleton the attentions I once paid you—not to disparage me to her by look or hint, but, rather, as far as you have any influence at all, to cast it in my favor. You must promise me this; in return I will promise not to betray you to any of my friends, to explain our drive to Otis if I ever see him again, and not to hint to the lady anything in *your* disfavor. Refuse, and I will ruin your character with her and with Garner. Say anything against *me*, and I will tell her that jealousy is the cause of your detraction, and explain to her where you were this afternoon, out riding with the bad man whom you decry! You see, you are in my power! Do you promise me never to say a word against me, and to do what you can to promote my suit with Miss Appleton?"

Mildred pressed her pale lips together in silence. She would enter into no compact with this scoundrel. Yet, as he said, he had her good name in his power, and she shuddered as she recalled that blasting look of contempt which the man she loved—adored, with the pure adoration of a young girl's trusting nature—and to whom she had been united before God's altar, had cast upon her a few moments before.

She had been imprudent in trusting herself with this bad man; but one need hardly expect a great deal of worldly wisdom in a little creature barely seventeen; and she had been led into this danger only by the strong wish to see again that husband who had come to her, like some splendid being out of some superior world, to win her love only to leave her. To see him what would she not do? She had leaned on the broken reed of Brummell Pomeroy's honor—and this was the result!

"Do you promise?" repeated the man by her side, in that low, concentrated, almost hissing tone, which is so eloquent of a malicious will set to have its own way.

Little Mildred looked at the blue sky, where the first large star of night was beginning to burn, and where, along the summer horizon, the blush of the June sunset yet lingered—looked about at the shining river, the thousand lamps of the great city they were approaching, the bridge, the masts of the distant shipping—with a mute appeal in her large, innocent eyes that might have touched the very stones of the street. But there was nothing and no one to befriend the orphaned and deserted child.

Mildred had learned to love her husband's young, proud, beautiful cousin very fondly. Not to save herself would she injure Honoria. And it would be injury of the most irretrievable character to allow her to be deceived into loving and marrying a dastard like this parasite, fop and scoundrel who had just unfolded his plans to her. She could not seal her lips by such a pledge as he required of her.

She knew that Honoria loved Otis; and she would only have been too glad to see her interested in some other man—but not in Brummell Pomeroy—not in that base creature.

The spirited black ponies flew along through the soft twilight; Brummell leaned forward to study the face of the silent girl by his side—leaned forward, with an infernal smile, to see the effect of his avowed purposes on the pure mind of the child-woman which, so far, he had been unable to corrupt; and as he so leaned and looked the feet of the horses struck the long bridge, and to conform with the rules he had to restrain their speed and break them down to a walk.

Resolved not to promise, desperate, loathing the necessity for remaining an instant longer by his side, Mildred suddenly arose to her feet and sprung out upon the bridge.

Brummell drew rein; his face was dark and threatening.

"Return, Mrs. Garner, or you will be sorry. You risk a great deal, for such a little prude as you are, alone on this bridge at this hour. Are you not afraid?"

"Yes—of you."

"I am not, at present, your greatest danger, little simpleton."

"God will take care of me."

"You think so. Do you know what I shall do?—drive directly to Miss Appleton's, tell her where I saw you last, and what you are. I shall not make you out a saint, either, my little lady."

Mildred would not reply; it would be useless to crave his mercy, unless she promised what he wanted. She walked as rapidly as her trembling limbs would allow away from the carriage and in the direction of Cambridge.

A mad desire to see her husband was upon her—to see him, and forestall the slanders of this man whom she had made her enemy—to see him, and tell him how she only loved him more and more as the weary days rolled on, and beg him to take her, all unworthy as she was, and try what a fond, faithful, idolatrous little wife she would be to him.

Brummell cast a look after her and drove on; he did not care for a scene in the street, and he could not leave his team.

Mildred hurried along the road at a pace which was, in one sense, a protection to her, for it proved her to be out for some purpose beside loitering. Her dress was so plain that she was thought by passers-by to be some sewing-girl going home after a day's toil in the city, and saving her car-fare by walking.

Her hat was pulled down to shade her face as much as possible.

So she hastened on and came back into the streets over which she had been whirled in a carriage once that afternoon—first of all to Miller's, whose door she passed and repassed until a student, who had noted her actions, spoke to her and she fled like a frightened dove. Then she wandered about the University buildings, for Pomeroy had said that Otis was preparing a class to enter, and he might, perhaps, be in that vicinity. Hour after hour Mildred wandered aimlessly about. She was no longer exactly in her right mind; for the excitement, the disappointment, the dread of the afternoon, combined with fear, fatigue, and the wild craving to find Otis, were fast rendering her feverish and half delirious. More than once she was rudely addressed; but no one touched her, and she only hurried on and on the more determined to find Otis, and looking in the face of every man she passed to see if it might be him.

At ten o'clock the moon came up, rising in her full June splendor, silvering the roofs and towers and arches of the great cluster of college buildings, and casting black shadows under the old elms. Poor little Mildred was dimly conscious of soft little gusts and snatches of sweetness from clumps of roses that stood with their pink faces turned to the sky—then of the songs and laughter of gay young fellows wandering about the moonlit streets—then of solitude—silence—a green meadow, a quiet-flowing river, rippling and

shining under the silver smile of the lustrous heavens.

"Oh, how my head aches," sighed the poor, forlorn child, "and how parched my mouth is! I am so tired I cannot get to the water, or I would bathe my forehead and have a drink. And I haven't found Otis! He does not care for me! Nobody cares for Mildred now. Mother is dead. I am married, and yet I am not a wife. Otis would be very, very glad if I were dead. I wish I were dead. Yet, if I die, he will always believe that I was bad, for that wicked man will tell him so."

No, foolish Mildred, if you die, Brummell Pomeroy will be too well rid of you to care to let it be known to any that he ever spoke to you or heard your name!

Mildred stumbled on toward the cool, shining water. Her slippers were wet through with dew, her dress soiled and draggled with dust and dew; she took off her hat and dropped it out of her listless hand as she went along; her brain was dizzy, her fancies confused; she wanted to die; she wanted to quench her thirst; she wept because she had not found her husband; she started and looked about for fear Pomeroy was following her—and so, weeping, sometimes lifting her wild, lovely face to the sky and praying, sometimes sinking upon her knees she was so faint and tired, Mildred struggled toward the river, reached it, stooped over the lush grasses of the bank, but, before she could taste the water, grew dizzy, tottered and sunk back on the damp grass in a deep swoon.

CHAPTER XV.

TELLTALE WITNESSES.

WHEN it came time to shut up the house for the night, and her little companion had not returned, Miss Appleton felt uneasy, almost alarmed; but concluded that Mildred had friends with whom she had been persuaded to pass the night, and so went to bed and to sleep without much delay.

When morning failed to bring Mildred, and afternoon also, she wondered more than a little over this unlooked-for desertion. She had grown very fond of her companion—hired for wages, it is true, but almost her own age, and so pretty and refined that she had made friend and confidante of her—and now missed her more than she would like to acknowledge.

It seemed like downright ingratitude in Milla to behave so, for she had been very, very kind to her.

Honoraria dressed herself for visiting and made a call or two on intimate friends; came home to a dull tea with her aunt, thought how pleasant Mr. Pomeroy had made that hour the evening previous, and was called from the tea-table to the drawing-room to entertain first one, then two or three, and finally a half-dozen young gentlemen who dropped in to pay their respects, and sun themselves in the beauty of the young heiress. The last to come and the last to go was Mr. Pomeroy. He had bowed himself into Honoraria's presence with more trepidation than he often felt; for he was in doubt as to whether Mildred had returned here, and told her story of his infamous conduct; but as soon as he perceived, from Honoraria's friendly manner, that he was still unbetrayed, he recovered all his assurance and made himself the envy and the despair of the "younger fry," who one by one retreated, leaving him, at last, alone in the company of the bewitching young beauty. He remained to the last on purpose to learn what he could about Mildred; and it was not many minutes before he had led Honoraria on to confide to him the strange conduct of the girl in going away without warning and failing to return.

"Do you think any accident, or anything wrong, has happened to her, Mr. Pomeroy? I should be miserable if I thought so; and have the police looking for her, immediately."

"Do not trouble yourself about that girl one moment," Brummell said. "They are all the same—deceitful and ungrateful."

"But Milla was not like others! She was—"

"Ah! I dare say she made you think so. To me—I will say it, now that you have found her out—she looked like one of the slyest, most cunning of her class. You are too trusting, too generous, Miss Appleton. Do not think any more of that little serpent. I am jealous, you see! I want you to think of me." And then, without actually declaring himself, or saying anything so definite as to alarm her or give her a chance to refuse his suit, Brummell made love to the glowing, blushing, half-retreating young beauty in a way that, had not her sad inner thought been fixed so persistently on her absent cousin, would certainly have had the effect he wished.

It was after ten when Brummell went away. Late as it was, he had scarcely gone half a block from the house when the bell was rung again, and Shackles, who was about to bolt the door, opened it, to admit his young master, Otis Garner.

"Ah, Mr. Otis!" he cried, joyfully.

"Hush, Shackles. You are well, I hope. Is Miss Appleton still down-stairs?"

"Yes, sir; in the drawing-room."

"Well, I am going in to see her. You need not say anything to any one about my being here," and Otis stepped forward to the open door of the drawing-room, followed by the sorrowful eyes of the old servant, who noted the paleness of the young man's face, the gloom of his manner, and—fact equally solemn to the valet—the last season's cut of his clothes.

"Cousin Otis!"

"Yes, Honoraria, but do not alarm the house. I came to see you. You seem to have plenty of admirers! I have been hanging about, waiting for the last of them to go away, for at least two hours. Do you have good times nowadays, cousin?"

Tears started in the girl's dark eyes.

"Do you have good times, cousin Otis? I know you do not, and it troubles me all the time. Even if I were not in mourning for uncle, I could not be really happy, Otis, so long as I felt that you were banished from your own house and home."

"Then you still think of that, sometimes?"

"I think of nothing else—nothing else."

"If I were not a married man, would you love me, Honoraria?"

"You have no right to ask."

"I have a sort of moral right. Let me explain. Day before yesterday I saw my wife—as the law calls her—out riding with a gay young man of the town. They drove to Cambridge, stopped at Miller's for ices—were having a good time, generally. What was I to think of that?—that she was breaking her heart for me? No, indeed. She is evidently able to take care of herself; I shall not trouble my conscience any longer about her. She will do something bad before long; then, if she does not seek a legal separation from me, I shall from her. I wanted you to know this; I wanted you to promise to wait for me. So I came here once more to tell you. I feel happier now that I am certain that girl cares no more for me than I for her. But I have been deucedly jealous, walking up and down under your windows all the evening, seeing, through the parted curtains, all these moths singeing their wings in your radiance. It did seem hard for them all to have more rights in this house than I. Honoraria, supposing I come to you at the end of a year or two, free to marry you, what can be done about this money business? If you love me as I love you, you will be willing to give up everything to this relative, whoever he is, and share my poverty with me. Do you love me as much as that, sweet? Answer me."

"Otis, I shall never answer such questions as these so long as you are bound as you are to another. You ought not to ask them—I ought not to answer them."

"But it is so hard to live and hope on without any encouragement. I don't want you to do or say anything wrong, my sweet. I only want to be sure that you love me enough to wait for me. If I was certain of that I should

not be disturbed by all the butterflies of Boston basking in your glory."

"What are you doing, Otis? Where do you stay?"

"Not so many miles from here. I am coaching some young fellows for the fall examination. When that is through with I don't know what I shall do. But you don't answer me, cousin!"

"Because I dare not—ought not. Oh, Otis. I would rather you would never come near me at all than always to talk to me so when you have no right."

"Is that prudishness, Honoria, or a way to get rid of me?"

"God knows, if I could take your place and give you mine, Otis, I would do it only too gladly. I feel like a *thief*, eating your bread, stealing your place! Uncle was cruel to me as well as to you, Otis," and she sobbed.

"But you don't love me?"

"Say I do not, cousin Otis: that will end it."

"Good-by, then, Honoria."

"Good-by."

She heard him move away, but she would not call him back. The struggle in her sobbing, panting breast was terrible; but she could not, would not allow this man whom she loved to make love to her, under the circumstances. She knew that he had forged the chain which bound him in an hour of reckless sport; but his will could not break it as easily as it assumed it.

This brief visit from her cousin made an impression on Honoria which did not wear away in one day, or two, or many days. It filled her with a sadness which kept down her naturally gay spirits; but if it had no other good effect, it had this—it kept her from yielding to the influence of Brummell Pomeroy's persistent attentions.

July came, and with it such weather as drove the lingering young lady to the mountains. Before she went from home, she advertised for M. L. to come or send an order for the trunks she had left at Miss Appleton's; then, there being no response to this call, Honoria sought in the trunks themselves some clue to Mildred's identity and whereabouts. Thinking it only right to look after the property of the missing girl herself, she thought to make a memorandum of their contents, so that if anything were lost during her absence she would know of it. One sultry morning, therefore, Honoria, with a goodly bunch of keys, entered the bedroom of her vanished companion; but she had no need to try those in her hand, for the girl's own keys lay in a little sewing-basket on a table.

You anticipate what the young lady found in those telltale trunks! The wedding-dress, the wedding-vail, the costly string of pearls, the withering bouquet of white roses and white violets—the certificate of marriage, bearing the names of Mildred Lovelace and Otis Garner—a photograph of her cousin, Otis—the bank-book, still blank of any entries—all the dainty, expensive *bijouterie* which the extravagant young fellow lavished on his fairy bride before the blow fell which cut off his power to indulge in such gifts—all were here, lying in the perfect neatness and order which had characterized the little companion, mutely telling the girl's eloquent story to the proud beauty who hung over the trunks, with pale face and shining eyes and excited expression.

So! she was Otis' child-wife! She, the humble girl he had picked up out of the street and married! She, the one of whom her haughty Garner cousin was ashamed! Whom he had married in jest, and then basely deserted! The image of Mildred, as she had been in their confidential hours together, rose before Honoria. The pure, exquisite face, the large soft eyes that seemed to mirror heaven, the glorious, glimmering, shimmering golden vail of hair, the sweet mouth, tremulous with sensibility, the slender, pliant figure round and delicate, the look of purity and goodness—in short, Milla's own sweet self arose in her memory, and the generous, ardent girl said to herself, with flashing eyes:

"If Otis had been the Grand Duke himself that girl was good enough for him. A Cinderella—a darling little Cinderella—and her prince abandoned her! Oh, if I had known while she was here I would have sworn to be her sister! I would have seen to it that she had justice done to her! Why did she come here? Why! in the hopes of meeting him, of course! Poor child! I would give everything to know what has become of her.

"What was that Otis said about her being out driving with a gay fellow the afternoon she left me? I cannot believe little Milla is bad. I will not believe it. Haven't I lived with her, talked with her, watched her?—not even a shadow of guilt ever passed over that white soul. Otis is mistaken. I shall tell him so when I see him. Ah! when will that be? Poor cousin! I love him—but I love Milla, too, and he must be made to love her! Yes, from this moment, I give you up, Otis Garner."

She arose from her knees beside the trunk, looking before her with those bright, piercing eyes as if she saw her cousin standing there; pressed her hand tightly over her heart, set her lips firmly together over the sigh that should not escape them, and so stood for two or three minutes. In that brief time died all the feeble hopes she might half-consciously have cherished, that this unloved, unworthy wife might die, or might do ill, and she regain her cousin. She no longer wished for this. As for herself, she should live an old maid—as for Milla, she should fight her battles for her, if the opportunity ever came.

At this juncture her eyes lighted on a little diary lying modestly in a corner of one of the trunks. Honoria would resent the idea that curiosity had anything to do with her peeping into it—it was only the desire to right the young wife, which caused her to glance over page after page on which little Mildred had breathed out her heart in words of pure adoration which taught Honoria that she, as yet, had only sipped at the wine-cup of love—had never felt its true madness thrilling her veins.

"How she loves him!" gasped the dark beauty, almost breathless. "Ah, cousin, I do not love you like that! And this fond wife is capable of flirting with other men? More than ever I doubt it. If I could find Otis I would give him this diary to read." And Honoria, replacing it, relocked the tell-tale trunks and went to direct her maid in the important operation of packing her own for her summer tour.

The next day she was off; the day after Brummell Pomeroy followed in the same direction. He was a man of perseverance when he had an object to gain which would further his own interests; certainly, this beautiful brunette, with her archness, her youth, her untrammelled possession of a vast property, was an object worthy of his most patient effort.

Honoria did not enjoy her summer's pleasure—though her way was strewn with conquests and the elegant Brummell had placed himself at her service—so much as she might have done had she not been over-anxious about the fate of her cousin and poor, lost Milla.

Yet had she known about these, as she wished, she would not have enjoyed herself even in that limited degree which she did.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRANGER AT THE GATE.

PENTACKET is a lovely little village in summer. It is in the north-western portion of Massachusetts in full view of the mountains, and not far from a romantic little lake, while its own noisy, rapid little river runs through charming nooks, and foams down many a rocky fall. The air of Pentacket is clear and cool, when it is very sultry in some other places; its views are fine, its inhabitants know how to win a living out of the advantages of their situation, and, in hot weather, the village is crowded with summer boarders. There is one large, roomy, airy hotel, with verandas and green blinds, and a band of music and a ball-

room, which does a rushing business in July and August; but a great many quiet people prefer the seclusion of private dwellings, and full half the families of Pentacket take boarders in the summer season.

The Fletchers did not live immediately in the village; but their house—being fine and large, with well-kept grounds, and their orchards and vegetable gardens and poultry yards and meadows perambulated by handsome cows, giving fine promise of abundant good cheer—was regularly besieged, each summer, by applicants for board. But, as Farmer Fletcher and his wife thought they had enough of this world's goods, and prized their ease and privacy more than the dollars to be made in such ventures, they seldom yielded to the besiegers. Once or twice they had been induced, out of pure kindness of heart, to take in some invalid, whom they felt assured they could benefit; but the spring of Ruth's serious illness Mrs. Fletcher had warned her husband to give no encouragement to any stranger during that summer.

"It will keep my hands full waiting on Ruth. 'Twill be months before she will be fit to do for herself; and then, too, husband, this affair about the schoolmaster makes me feel as if I couldn't endure to look a stranger in the face, or to have to talk to 'em. We are all concerned in it, you see, as 'twas Ruth's admiring the teacher urged poor Jasper to do what he did. If he was my own son I couldn't feel much worse. First place, I liked the boy and looked to his being my son some day; and then, I can't shake off a sense of responsibility, seeing as Ruth's so mixed in it. Poor Ruth! I don't see what under the sun she took it into her head to care for the master for! He wasn't our sort—and Jasper was. You see, I kind of blame my own child—and she at death's door for her folly, too!—and it's a miserable business all around! A miserable business! I should think Jasper's mother would die outright, for it's almost killing me. Oh, dear! oh, dear! There don't seem to be any way out of it!"

No! There certainly was no way out of the dreadful trouble of that summer! Jasper Judson was pining away the long days in jail awaiting the trial to come off late in June; her own daughter was struggling slowly, very slowly up from that bed of fever and delirium on which she had been so long stretched—and Mrs. Fletcher, more grave and sad than even in that season long ago when she had buried another little girl, leaving only Ruth, went about her house with a heavy heart.

Thus it happened that she would not listen to the dulcet persuasion of a very beautiful and stylish Boston girl, who, with her maiden aunt—the aunt was suffering with a cough left by a winter attack of pneumonia—had come there the first of June and begged to be accommodated, professing herself willing to pay any price for rooms and board, as the aunt disliked hotels, disliked villages, and craved a quiet country place where she could recover at leisure.

The girl was a beautiful creature, and had such a sweet, coaxing way with her, that Mrs. Fletcher found it hard to refuse her, softening her refusal with the statement of her daughter's illness. She heard, afterward, that the ladies had concluded to take rooms at the hotel, when the younger one—a great beauty and heiress—was the observed of all observers.

Two or three days after the first application came another. A livery hack drove slowly through the winding drives of the lawn and stopped before the steps of the porch which ran across the front of the old stone house. It had showered during the day; and the air was sweet with the scent of roses and new-mown hay. The slender pillars of the porch seemed hardly able to bear up the weight of rose-vines which clung to them, heavy with great, drooping clusters of pink and white and red.

The meadows across the road were dotted with haycocks thrown up hastily to escape the damaging effects of the summer rain. Birds were darting about as if intoxicated by the joy

of the hour, or by too many draughts of dew from flower and tree. A few golden clouds floated peacefully above the distant hills. For the first time—since, on that terrible day following Christmas, she had been carried up them in a fainting fit—Ruth had come down-stairs. She was sitting in an easy-chair out on the porch, dressed in a loose white wrapper, with a white zephyr shawl thrown about her head and shoulders.

No longer the rosy, dimpled lovely school-girl; but a grave, sorrowful invalid, her face pale and thin, her figure a mere shadow of its past rounded outlines; her eyes preternaturally large and bright, set in her wasted face; and her beautiful hair, that had once rippled far below her waist, long ago cut from her fevered head and now growing out in little curling rings about her white forehead and neck, giving her a childish look that contradicted the sad expression on her features.

The poor girl had been brought down in her father's arms and placed in the chair that she might enjoy the beauty of the sky and the freshness of the air. Her mother sat near her, watching every feeble movement with a mother's fond devotion, certain, now that Ruth had actually left her sick-room, that she would get well. The child had asked for some roses, and had pinned one in her white dress at the bosom, and held the others in her lap idly playing with them.

It was this pretty and yet sad picture which met the eyes of the lady who descended from the livery-hack, and came, rather timidly, up the steps and spoke to Mrs. Fletcher.

"Dear madam," she began immediately, in a low voice, so pathetic that the very sound of it touched the matron's heart and won her good will, "I want you to take me and keep me this summer. I am able to pay you for all the trouble I shall be to you. Do not say 'no'—please don't say 'no'—for I am ill, and a widow, and alone."

"I am ill, a widow, and alone!" Could words have greater pleading in them than those? They went to the hearts of both mother and daughter, who gazed on, nevertheless, a full minute without speaking. A widow! this little childish, fairy creature, who did not seem to have seen eighteen summers. They could hardly believe it. But on her delicate, wan, lovely face was impressed the truth of the stranger's story. The mourning garments which so ill befit the girlish figure, might have been falsely assumed. But not the look of still sorrow in those great solemn violet eyes—not the worn pallor of the young brow, nor the lines about the sweet mouth.

There was something strangely appealing in face, voice and figure. Tears—which came easily now—rose in Ruth's eyes as she looked at the lovely little stranger about whom there seemed to be but one bright thing to relieve her sable garments and pale face. Her beautiful gold hair was this one bright thing. That had the peculiar softness and light which so seldom outlasts childhood.

Its bright, wavy masses gleamed under the black bonnet, breaking out in rebellious tendrils and rings. Ruth reached out her thin hand and touched her mother, signaling her to grant the lady's petition; Mrs. Fletcher was already surrendering in her thoughts, and now that Ruth approved, at once gave way to her inclination to be gracious.

"We have refused every one, so far," she began. "My daughter has been ill since Christmas—this is her first visit down-stairs—and I have had my hands full with her. But Ruth says I am to take you—she must fancy you, I imagine!—and I don't care to go against her will yet awhile. She's a spoiled child, ma'am, by reason of her sickness; and I must let her have her own way, you see," smiling. "What is your name?"

"Mrs. Lovelace, madame. I will tell you a little about myself now, so that you may know who you are to be so kind to. My father was clerk in Mr. H—'s store in Boston; shortly after he died I was married—very young, only sixteen, madame—and my husband died in

little over a year—between five and six months ago. Meantime, I had lost my mother—you see I have had trouble. It has made me ill, and the doctors sent me to Pentacket to recuperate. I do not like to be at a hotel—I will not stay in some gossiping boarding-house—I heard of you, and I came to you."

"I hope, my dear, you have come to the right place," responded Mrs. Fletcher, in a motherly tone, for she felt very much drawn to the pale little thing who had had so much trouble. "Will you stop now?"

"Yes, if you will let me. The man can bring my trunk up to-night. I left it at the hotel for fear you would not take me. I will pay him for bringing me here and ask him to return with my baggage."

This bit of business being transacted, the lady returned to the porch, and sinking down in a chair opposite Ruth, her great, solemn eyes seemed to search the girl's face.

"You, too, have been very ill?" she said.

"Yes, I have had a long, long, tedious time."

"Perhaps you, too, have lost a dear friend?"

Ruth's eyes fell before the clear, solemn gaze, and a faint blush rose in her colorless cheeks.

"I have lost a very dear friend," she felt compelled to answer. "Still, he was not a father or a husband. I had no right to take it so seriously. I think it was the *shock* that made me ill, Mrs. Lovelace. He died suddenly—was drowned—or—or—some say, was—murdered."

Mrs. Fletcher had gone in to see about putting a room in order for the stranger, and to tell Hannah to set the tea-table for one more, so that Ruth and the lady were alone together. Ruth was surprised at herself, when she came to a pause, to think she had told so much to a stranger, when she had been utterly unable to discuss the subject with her own family and friends. It seemed as if the solemn eyes drew the whole truth right out of her.

A little shudder ran from the lady's head to her feet when Ruth pronounced—in an awed, ghastly whisper—that word, *murdered*. It might have been caused by the summer wind blowing into her face a dash of raindrops from the roses; anyway, she shivered, and when she raised her handkerchief to wipe away the perfumed drops, it was some time before she lowered it.

"I read of such—an occurrence—last winter, in the papers. Pentacket, I am sure, was the name of the village. The—the—victim was a school-teacher, was he not?"

"Yes, madame. I and my brother attended his school."

"Was he—a married man?"

"Oh, no! Certainly not."

"Not? And the young man, who is to be tried—for the murder—was—jealous of him, the man who drove me here said."

"I am afraid he was," answered Ruth, trembling and pale.

"The schoolmaster paid particular attention—to you?"

"I thought so, Mrs. Lovelace. Indeed, indeed, I was quite sure of it at the time. But now, it may not have been anything serious—I see that! I admired him, and I—I was said to be the prettiest girl in school, and he paid me compliments and attentions until my head was turned. But he may have been only laughing at me, all the time. I think so now."

Great tears were dropping down Ruth's pale cheeks; the lady pressed her hand against her own heart, and asked:

"Then you were not engaged to this Mr. Otis, after all? He did not ask you to marry him?"

"No—no. I expected him to; and I scorned poor Jasper, whom I had liked since he was a little boy, and threw his ring off into the snow, and did everything to anger and madden him. I was a vain, foolish girl. But oh, I have paid for my folly. I have suffered—I have suffered!"

"Poor child," murmured the little pale lady, drawing her chair over beside Ruth. "Poor, foolish child!" caressing the thin hand. "I

have been foolish, too, and I have suffered. I thought a man could be won to love me who never did. I loved him with a wild idolatry; he was my king, my angel, my heaven; he was my husband, too; but he scorned me in life, and now, perhaps, scorns me in death. Men are cruel and wicked to us poor girls. But it is all over with me now, and I am only eighteen."

"It is all over with me, too, and I am but just seventeen."

"Not all over with you, child. You will love, and marry, and be happy."

"Never!" whispered Ruth, with such sadness in her voice that the stranger turned away her face to wipe the tears which gathered to hear so despairing a word from one so young.

"When does the trial of this young man take place?" the lady asked, presently.

"In two weeks, or a little over. And I have got to go into court and give my testimony. It was I who first accused him. Oh, I have prayed and prayed never to get well! I would sooner die than say the things against my old friend and schoolfellow I shall have to say then. But I am getting stronger every day, and they will take me there and compel me to say words against Jasper that may be the means of his death. Mrs. Lovelace, if Jasper dies, and by my mouth, I shall die, too. I feel it."

Just then Mrs. Fletcher came to escort Mrs. Lovelace to her room, while the father lifted his daughter tenderly and bore her back to the bed, where she lay pale, listless and exhausted, tear after tear slowly oozing from between her closed eyelids.

In the mean time, in her own room, the stranger had flung herself down on her knees before a window, and, with her chin on the sill and her eyes fixed on the distant mountains and sunset sky, remained in such a reverie that Hannah had to speak three times at her door before she could call the wandering spirit back to the realization that the weary body needed refreshment.

Mildred Lovelace—as she chose to still call herself—had come to the Fletchers' knowing whom she would meet there, and urged by a terrible jealousy and curiosity to see the girl with whom her husband had been trifling when he met his sudden fate; as well as to be in the vicinity at the time of Jasper Judson's trial.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LADY ON THE PORCH.

IT was singular that Honoria Appleton should have come to Pentacket at such a time—singular that she should hear the approaching trial for murder spoken of at table and in drawing-room, day after day, and yet have no suspicion that she was in any way interested in it.

Yet her arrival in the village at this critical period was a mere accident, depending on the impaired health of her aunt, who had been ordered to the mountains by her physicians in the hopes of getting rid of a lingering cough.

That Honoria should be blind and deaf and dumb on the subject of the murder, was not so strange, either.

Otis was not an uncommon name in Massachusetts; there were plenty of Otises in Boston; and that the last name of this murdered man should be the same as her cousin's given name did not awaken in her mind one suspicion of the truth.

It was impossible for such a belle and heiress as this to be many days in any place without her train being increased by several of her more persistent admirers.

Brummel Pomeroy was the first to arrive at the hotel in Pentacket in which the aunt and her lovely niece had finally decided to take a suite of rooms. Being early in the season, the young lady could indulge her extravagance by engaging one-third of the house for her accommodation, if she wished; but she contented herself with two large bedrooms and two par-

lors adjoining, and was gazed at with awe-struck admiration by the waiters and chambermaid—a class who always do love to see money thrown away. The landlord rejoiced in his best patron all the more when he found the tribe that followed, all ready to lavish what means they had to keep up a brave appearance before the rich beauty.

He cared no more for any of them than the candle cares for the moths who circle about, except that they served occasionally to make less dull a tiresome day.

Brummel must have bled some of his rich young friends in Boston pretty freely, for he had an abundance of spending money, kept a pair of horses and a light buggy in the hotel stables, and was altogether brilliant, with his canes and his gloves and cravats, such as even the most aspiring of his younger fellows could not hope to attain.

Brummel, too, had flattered himself into the aunt's good graces, so that she was continually intoning his praises, in the hearing of her niece. Altogether, it would have been far from surprising if Honoria had been utterly subdued by his fascinations and his devotion, all of which had laid steady siege to her heart for over a year.

It is undeniable, too, that she had given him some encouragement; yet, always after she had shown this weakness, she shed a few tears of regret in the privacy of her own room, and resolved that she would never, never do so again. Why she regretted it she could not have told herself; partly it was that her young imagination still clung to her cousin in spite of heroic efforts to tear it away; and partly it was that her virgin soul, if it had not the wisdom of experience, did have that of innocence, and shrunk, it knew not why, from the professions of one so black at heart as Brummel Pomeroy. This Prince of Darkness appeared like an angel of light, yet her pure spirit felt a difference that it did not try to analyze.

Brummel was angry and impatient at his slow progress; but the thought of the young coquette's millions—all her own, and sure to be all her husband's, when she got one—sustained him and urged him to persevere.

So, here he was at Pentacket, "astonishing the natives," and aiding Miss Appleton finely in her efforts to find the little mountain village amusing. Drives, picnics and mountain excursions were the order of the day. Brummel congratulated himself on having the beauty so much to himself, taking courage to believe that before they left Pentacket, the little hand,

"All queenly with its weight of rings,"

would be pledged to him.

Yet before he had been enjoying this felicity of faith ten days, he made a discovery which disturbed him more than he would have cared to acknowledge.

He was out driving alone one afternoon, for Miss Appleton had a headache, or was writing letters, or had some excuse to refuse his invitation. Among the other accomplishments which made him the "Admirable Crichton" of the young bloods of Boston, was his knowledge of horses. He always rode and drove those fiery animals for which his admirers paid, but of whom they were afraid. He had hired, on coming to Pentacket, the superb blooded animals owned by hapless Jasper Judson, and which were suffering for want of exercise because the father had not the heart to use these pets of his son. Brummel's control of them was usually perfect, but, on this occasion, having driven over to a neighboring village, he was late in returning, and was overtaken by a sudden summer tempest.

The frightful cannonade of the thunder, the flash of the lightning in their very eyes, the rush of the wind, and the wild swaying of the roadside trees, excited the horses more and more, until a sudden crackling of thunderbolts over their heads and a blaze in their faces, made them so wild that their driver lost control of them, and they dashed furiously along the country road, running from one side of it to the other, and soon dumping Mr.

Brummell Pomeroy unceremoniously into the mud and dust. He clung to the reins, through all, like a hero, being dragged some distance along the way, when a farmer, who had kept out too late in the effort to save his hay, dashed out of a fence-corner to his assistance, and, at serious risk, stopped the frightened pair. A few gentle, reassuring words then quieted the trembling horses, and the farmer swung open the carriage gate to his place, and led them in, taking them to the stable, and leaving Brummell to find the shelter of the house-porch.

Pomeroy, somewhat stunned, but not injured much, staggered forward to the piazza, anxious to get out from under the avenue of elms, which led up to the roomy and comfortable-looking dwelling, for he had a guilty conscience, and was afraid of the lightning.

Some one was sitting there who did not appear to be afraid of it. A slight, youthful figure, clothed in deep mourning, leaned back in an arm-chair, and a pale, beautiful face was turned to the stormy sky, its large, sad eyes fixed on the driving clouds with such an intensity of self-absorption that their owner was unaware of the approach of the intruder.

Brummell came near uttering an oath of surprise.

"That little devil! What is she doing here?" was his wondering thought. "She will be sure to make me trouble," was his next reflection.

As she had not yet perceived him, he retreated from the steps he was about to ascend, and followed the drive around, and went on to the stables, where he found the farmer caring for the dripping horses.

"You are very kind," he began. "I thank you a thousand times. But I think I will go right on, and let John, at the hotel, see to the team. It is breaking up now—the worst of the storm must be over, and I am so drenched that I had best get back and have a change of garments."

"Wife will fix you up with some clothes of mine, if you choose to go in the house. They may not be of the same cut as yours"—his eyes twinkling at the sad condition of the city fop's elegant suit—"but they will be dry."

"Much obliged, I am sure, but I had better hasten on. By the way, do you take summer visitors into your family, sir?"

"Not often. Don't like to do it, as a usual thing. Sometimes wife takes invalids out of kindness—got one now, a pretty, quiet little creature, timid as a mouse, and sweet as a pink—only just eighteen, and a widow. Sad, ain't it?"

"A widow?" echoed Brummell, beginning to hum a tune.

"Yes, sir, a widow. My daughter has taken a great fancy to her."

"Did she have references?" asked the man-of-the-world, between two bars of a light tune he was humming.

"Didn't ask for any. Her face was reference enough."

"Ah, you country people never learn to be sufficiently suspicious. You know, I dare say, that it is a favorite move on the part of these adventuresses to pass themselves off as widows. Not that this little lady may not be all right. I only speak on general principles. You know what Weller says—'Look out for vidders.' By the way, your little village is not quite as sinless as Paradise, after all. You are to have a murder trial next week, I hear."

Brummell said this with no purpose except to keep up an appearance of sociability with the farmer, after dropping in his mind the seed of a wicked suspicion against the young widow. He had not the remotest idea of who the murdered man had been, nor knew that the one he addressed had any special interest in the subject.

"Yes," answered the other, "and a terrible thing it will be."

"Parties all young and foolish, weren't they?" ran on Brummell, indifferently, as he examined the harness to see if it had escaped the strain of the runaway. "Seems to me I

have heard something about jealousy being the motive of the murder."

"If you were not standing there in wet clothes I'd tell you all about it," said Mr. Fletcher, with a sigh—the load on his heart was heavy to bear, and he was yielding to the natural impulse to get rid of a part of it by communicating it to some one else—how often the human heart would break did it not bend itself to relieve the pressure!

"Oh, go on, if you please. I've got to mend this strap here; thank you, I have a string in my pocket." Brummell would not have lingered, at the risk of taking cold, had not his curiosity been aroused by the sight of Mildred Garner sitting on the porch of this man's house.

So he listened to the whole story of the murder—told from Mr. Fletcher's point of view—and heard how the speaker's own daughter was concerned in it, and what a terrible affair it was, and likely to destroy the happiness of two families. Brummell could not but take some interest in it; and, at the end, he inquired what the effect of the tragedy had been on the murdered man's relatives.

"That just adds to the singularity of the whole affair," replied Mr. Fletcher; "the fact that not one of his kith or kin have come forward to inquire after his fate. Nor was there anything in his room—papers, or what not—to tell us who to write to about it, or what steps to take to let his relatives know. The lawyers have written to two or three Otises of Boston—for he allowed to be from Boston, and to belong to a good family there, that he was too proud to live on, seeing they had not used him fair—but none of 'em seem to know about him. It's my private opinion there's some mystery about it—fact is"—speaking in a low voice, "I often think he isn't dead, after all. I'd give every dollar I've got in the world to prove it, but it's only an idea of mine. Folks say, 'Why, there's the bloody knife, and all; and if he ain't dead, what's become of him?' I can't answer them. I only wish I could. Often it appears to me as if he wasn't dead, and the rest was a terrible dream. Jasper Judson's got a quick temper, and he did act strange next day, but he's a good boy at heart, I'll stick to that! I'd rather have seen my daughter married to him than to this mysterious schoolmaster, handsome and learned and gentlemanly as he was. He was always a sad, gloomy man; and he had but one valise-trunk full of clothes with him, and yet he wore diamond sleeve-buttons!"

These incongruous facts evidently had made a strong impression on the farmer.

"Diamond sleeve-buttons, and a family who had wronged him, and his name was Otis?" muttered Brummell Pomeroy.

His companion looked at him in surprise at the voice in which he spoke—the gentleman's face was white, and he shivered.

"You are taking your death of cold, sir."

"I am afraid I am. And you really think that pretty young thing I saw on the porch is the widow she pretends to be?"

"I do," was the emphatic response; "that little lady could no more tell a lie than the angels. That's what we all think."

"You are probably right; though my experience makes me suspicious. I must attend this trial next week; you have aroused a deep interest in me—and then, it will help to pass the time. Much obliged for your kindness, Mr. —?"

"Fletcher. I wish you would at least put on a dry coat of mine."

"I'll be home in ten minutes with this team, Mr. Fletcher—it's only a mile to the hotel. When I'm there, I'll run about until I am in a glow. Thank you, and good-afternoon," and Brummell drew far down over his face his broad-brimmed summer hat, and was careful to keep his head turned away as he sped by the house on his way to the road.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT THE FARMER FOUND.

RUTH FLETCHER remained in a very criti-

cal state. Had her mind been at ease, the physician said, her youth and health would have carried her triumphantly on, over all the exhaustion of her long illness; but nothing could be worse for her than the excitement, intense and terrible, of the swiftly-approaching trial. It was the fear, both of the doctor and her parents, that if this did not kill her outright, it would be the means of making her insane, so great was the nervous excitement so dangerous in her weakened condition.

All reference to the trial was forbidden in the family, and she was kept more or less under the influence of nervines, but she would coax her brother David into her room or out under the trees of the lawn, and would talk to him by the hour about it, and he would not dare to forbid it, because he plainly saw, boy though he was, that it was a relief to her strained nerves.

Ruth took great comfort also in the company of little Mrs. Lovelace. Mrs. Fletcher congratulated herself every day that she had not refused to take in the sweet little lady whose society was such a solace to her unhappy child.

It would have been a strange sight to any one acquainted with the history of both, to see these two girls together, Mildred leading Ruth to go over, for the hundredth time, every day and hour of her acquaintance with this schoolmaster, whose advent in that quiet village had led to such disasters.

How like a thunderbolt from heaven would it have been to Ruth herself, had she been told that this beautiful stranger, who listened with such eagerness to her too-willing story of her brief heart-affair with the teacher, was the wife of that man!

Wan, wide-eyed, smileless, the pale widow listened to these reminiscences from the lips of one as pale, as wan, as heart-broken as herself.

And now we must go back and learn, in brief, what had happened to poor Mildred after she sunk fainting to earth, under the cold light of the pitiless moon, on the green bank of the "silent river."

A market-gardener was on his way to Boston with a covered wagon loaded with some of the produce of his little farm. Twice a week he was accustomed to take this night-ride of fourteen miles so as to arrive at the city market, and secure his place among others on the streets adjoining as early as four o'clock. On this occasion Mr. Ezekiel Brads had with him his son, a strapping youth of two-and-twenty, who aided him in the cultivation of vegetables and small fruit, and the care of half a dozen cows. This son was named Ezekiel, too, after his father; he was long, light-colored, awkward and smart, and earned all the bread he ate and more besides.

Well, Zekel the younger, getting tired of riding on the sheepskin which covered the board seat on the truck-wagon, jumped out—behold on what trifles, seeming accidents, great events are often suspended!—on the road-side at the far edge of the field into which Mildred had wandered, and told his father he would "stretch his legs"—as if they were not long enough already!—by taking a cross-cut along the river path which would bring him out, half a mile further on, to the road again by the time the father arrived at that point. Thus it chanced that in striding along in his small edition of seven-league boots, looking at the lovely golden ripples on the river, and humming to himself, with a thought of some dairy-maid arising at his moonlit surroundings:

"The rose is red, the violet's blue,

Sugar is sweet, and so are you"—

he stumbled over the little figure lying prone in the dewy grass. Picking himself up, he stared a moment at the pale face upturned to the moonlight, and fled for his father, gasping out, when he reached the wagon, "that there was a girl, as handsome as a picture, lying dead in the grass by the water."

Meantime, the blow in her side, which Zekel Brad's foot had given her, had partially

aroused Mildred, and she was struggling to sit up when the two men came back to her.

"What on earth's the row?" asked the elder, of the bewildered girl, who pushed her golden hair from her forehead, and looked up at them in a dazed manner.

"Anybody been a-hurting you, miss?" persevered the farmer.

"I don't know, sir. Where am I?"

"Yeou ain't exactly where a gal of your age oughter be at this time o' night—out in a field by the Charles River."

"Oh, sir, I remember now. I was so tired and thirsty, and I tried to get to the water, but I fainted away."

"Yeou ain't been a-doing nothin' wrong, my gal, I hope?" observed the farmer, not unkindly, but a little suspiciously.

Mildred raised her eyes to the pure, glorious heavens, and two tears brightened in them, as she said, solemnly:

"No, no; as God is my witness, no! It is not I, sir, who have done wrong. I have gotten into this trouble by breaking away from those who have tried to injure me. Oh, sir, what can a poor orphan girl, so young, and without friends, do, when men are so cruel and wicked?"

"It's hard lines for her, I'll allow," answered the farmer, while Zekel felt, somehow, almost ready to do what he called "blubber."

"Whare do yeou belong, young lady?" continued Mr. Brads, senior.

"In Boston, sir."

"All right. Come, I'll take yeou home. I'm goin' that way, myself; if you can put up with a market-wagon, miss. Zekel, why don't you spring an' kinder help her along? Don't yer see, she's about used up? Shall I take yer home, miss? 'Twill be quite the safest way for yeou to get there?"

"Thank you," said Mildred, rising, with the young man's help.

Father and son took her by the arms and led her gently along to the wagon, where the patient horses were awaiting their arrival.

"Yeou can walk, Zekel," said the father, as they lifted the light little stranger to a seat on the sheep-skin.

"Yes, dad."

But the intruder seemed so distressed at compelling such a thing as that, that Zekel finally reluctantly seated himself beside her; and, indeed, the girlish form made no great usurpation of the broad seat: all three were comfortable, and the farmer insisted on the girl's having his overcoat—which he always took with him, even in June, on these night-rides—placed over her damp muslin dress.

The heavily-loaded wagon rattled slowly through the silent streets of Cambridge, along the road, and rumbled over the bridge straight on toward the sleeping city, now buried in the deepest repose of the twenty four hours. Mildred, too nearly dead with cold and fatigue to feel the acute pangs of the evening, was carried forward in a sort of listless dream, until, on their near approach to the city, the farmer turned to her and said:

"Tell me the street and the number, and I will take you home before I go into the market."

Then yesterday's mortal fear and dread preyed again on Mildred.

Home! Alas, word eloquent of comfort and protection to happier girls—what did it mean to her? She could not return to Miss Appleton's. To her exaggerated imagination, excited by the threats of Brummell Pomeroy, it seemed certain he must have gone straight to Miss Appleton with some false story of her character which would make that lady repel her, with ignominy, from her house. She was mortally afraid of Pomeroy, having had such a glimpse into the dark side of his character as made her dread worse things from his revenge. She wanted to get away from all these people, for a little while, anyway. After rousing herself to think over the situation, she said, in a low, sad voice:

"I have no home!"

"No home?"

"No, sir. I am an orphan, and poor. I was living with one of the first ladies of the city as a companion; but a bad man has slandered me to her, and I am afraid to go back to her. I know something very bad about him, and he wants to marry this rich young lady, and he is afraid that I will tell her the bad thing he did. Oh, sir, if you will take me home with you, where I shall be hidden and safe, I will do enough to earn my keeping, I know."

"Yeou? What can a little lady like you do in a rough farmer's house? Make butter-milk cows—scrub floors, I reckon? hay?" and he laughed at his own wit.

"No, sir. But I can do some things. Have you any small children—any girls? I can teach them almost anything they care to study. I can give them music-lessons. And I can sew. Just try me, sir, and you will see that I can earn my keeping about your house."

"Dad, yeou jest take her," spoke up Zekel, decidedly.

"Wall, she can go home with us, and we'll see what mother says about it," and so it was settled.

Zekel had picked up Mildred's hat out of the field, and she pulled this down over her face as they made their way through the crowds of teams already crowding the market.

"If you're so bashful, miss, you can sit way back in the wagon, after I've took out them baskets o' greens an' berries," and Mildred was glad to shrink further out of sight. Here, after an hour of business, during which he disposed of his truck, Mr. Brads brought her a large cupful of coffee and a roll.

Then, not long after the early summer sunrise, they left the city and made their way out into the country road. Mildred was feverish now, instead of being chilly, as she had been; the cool morning air felt delicious to her burning cheeks and lips; the world sparkled with dew, the birds were in ecstasies of song, and as even Cambridge was left behind and they got out into the midst of fields and farms, a sense of safety and repose came over her tired heart.

They arrived at the old stone farm-house in time for a late but excellent breakfast to which the two men did justice. Mrs. Brads received the new-comer with chilling reserve; she did not fancy having a city girl to "wait upon," and she was certain sure—as she told Mr. Brads privately—that there was something wrong about "that chit." However, she would not turn her off that day,—she wasn't so unchristian as that: Result, having tried our Mildred one day, she tried her seven, and having had a week, she began to wonder how she had ever got along without her.

The little thing was "wonderful handy." She could do no hard work—had never seen a cow milked and had no idea about butter; but she gave Sabrina lessons on her new guitar and taught her all kinds of fancy needlework; and—more pleasing still to the mother's vanity—she gave "an air" to Sabrina's dresses and hats and taught her to put up her hair as the ladies of Boston wore it. Then she had such a sweet voice, nothing rested Mrs. Brads so after a hard day's work like sitting out on the stoop while Mildred sang lovely airs to the accompaniment of that new guitar. And Mildred trimmed Mrs. Brads' bonnet up in the most stylish manner, without going to a cent's expense, and embroidered a cover to the parlor arm-chair that was wearing out. Why, as Mrs. Brads said, "the morsel that child ate, and the three glasses of fresh milk a day she drank, wa'n't nothin' at all to the comfort she was around the house, and makin' Sabrina's manners so much more genteel, besides."

And so the summer wore away, and Mildred, though she pined in spirit in that rude household, yet had many hours to herself when she could take her embroidery and steal down to the spring in the orchard or out to the haystack in the meadow, or up in the green, murmuring woods, and sit and dream the one long, endless dream of love and Otis Garner.

Then came the golden autumn and the hazy Indian Summer. And with every week that passed the fairy Mildred grew more lovely. Sad at heart as she was, this could not prevent country air and country cream and autumn fruit from brightening her violet eyes and making her delicate cheeks glow with a peachy bloom.

The longing to make one more desperate effort to see Otis was becoming uncontrollable when an incident happened which hastened her departure from the kind shelter which had opened to her at the hour of need: Zekel plucked up courage to declare his love and to beg her to marry him. So blind to his infatuation had she been that his avowal was a complete surprise; and out of gratitude to the family who had taken her on trust she had to soften her refusal by the explanation that she was already married.

"Snuff and sneezers!" groaned Zekel, looking at her in mingled despair and astonishment, "who would a' thunk it? A little mite of a critter like yeou, married!"

"I am, Zekel; but please don't tell anybody."

"Wall it's a bargain. If yeou won't say nothin' about my poppin' to yeou, I won't say nothin' about your being married. But I do swow yeou orter a' told on it sooner—before you broke my heart, boo, hoo," and the long-legged young fellow actually wept.

"But I never thought of—of—this, Zekel."

"Never mind, naow. I don't blame yeou much. Let's keep it to ourselves, Miss Mildred," and so they settled it.

Next market-day Mildred rode to town with the farmer; he insisted on it that she had earned wages in his family and paid her ten dollars before they parted. With that, and what she had in her purse the June day when she left Miss Appleton's, Mildred took the apartment in which her mother had died, certain that her enemies must have ceased to look there for her long before this.

Here she lived, seldom venturing on the street, through November and a part of December, doing needlework for a fancy store, and half-starving herself; but never sending to Miss Appleton's for her trunks or bank-book; clothing herself in a cheap dark calico and woolen shawl. It was about the middle of December that she was looking over, one evening—for want of something better to do—the old newspaper which came wrapped about her bundle of work; and on the inside page of which her eye was caught by the name, Otis. The article containing the name was of a personal character, stating that Mr. Otis, a Bostonian and Harvard graduate, had been engaged to teach the District School No. 3. It spoke very highly of him as an accomplished young gentleman who would be sure to prove a great favorite. Even before she finished reading it there came over Mildred a feeling of certainty that this was her husband. Either pride, or the desire to conceal himself from her, or some other motive, had induced him to drop the family name. It was all as clear to her as day; and before she laid her head on her pillow that night she had penned to this Henry Otis, School District No. 3, Pentucket, the brief letter of love and entreaty, which we have seen the schoolmaster reading, by the red firelight of Farmer Fletcher's sitting-room, a few days before the Christmas and its tragedy.

CHAPTER XIX.

WOING AND THREATENING.

No answer came to that timid but passionate appeal. Day after day poor Mildred sat sewing, starting and trembling at every sound, thinking that the postman was at the door with a letter, or, more joyful yet, that her husband himself had come.

At that time she took courage to write a note to Miss Appleton, without her address, asking that her trunks may be sent to the express office. This was done, and she obtained them from there without betraying her own residence. Then, out of these trunks, she took

one of the beautiful dresses and the pearls and ornaments, and would dress herself and curl her lovely glittering gold hair, and sit waiting, busying her fingers with her embroidery and her heart with hopes.

Otis Garner did not come. Weeks dragged along. One of the Pentacket papers again came wrapped about her work. She knew it and scanned it eagerly. Oh misery! oh horror of horrors! there in its crumpled columns was a long account of the tragedy on the ice on Christmas night.

Long, long did the poor girl droop in her chair over the fatal record, insensible to all the sorrow that it brought.

And after that there was a long, weary blank of weeks and months, during which she moved about, worked, ate and slept and *lived*—but what a pale, ghostly mockery of life! No mother to comfort her—no friend to speak a pitying word. This was the time when she first used her bank-book to draw out enough money to provide herself with the mourning which she thought proper to put on. She sent, also, under her name of Lovelace, a subscription to the paper in Pentacket, and in this, from time to time, she read items about the murder, and so knew when the trial was to come off. All this time she had no positive proof that the murdered schoolmaster was Otis Garner; yet she was as certain of it as if she had been with the skating-party that fatal night.

A strange feeling, for which she could not account, moved her, as the time of the trial approached, to go to Pentacket, so as to be there when it came off.

The name of Ruth Fletcher had not escaped the newspapers, and Mildred felt an intense, jealous desire to see the girl with whom her husband had been so friendly. Thus, on reaching the village, the first move was to inquire out the residence of the Fletchers, after which she went there determined to ask them to take her into their family for the summer.

After meeting Ruth, tender-hearted little Mildred could only pity her; pity her even while wildly jealous of her because she had once been Otis' favorite. She soon won the confidence of the country maiden, who confessed to her all that had ever passed between herself and Mr. Otis.

"I thought he loved me, because he was always so polite and gallant and said so many pleasant things to me," Ruth had told her, with flushing cheeks and downcast eyes. "But now, I do not think he has cared for me—it was just his way to be flattering and attentive. And the ring!—you see, I took it for granted that he had given it to me, and allowed him to see that I thought so, and that I was pleased. And then to find out that Jasper had given it! It was dreadful—not only that I was so disappointed, but so mortified! I was humiliated and angry, and I poured out my wrath on poor Jasper, who was not to blame, and flung his ring away in the most contemptuous manner. No wonder one so proud and quick-tempered as Jasper should have been maddened by my conduct! Oh, Miss Lovelace, I am the one to blame for everything! At first I was wild with anger at Jasper because he had done that terrible thing. But now, I am only sorry for him. I feel that the fault and the sin are mine. If I could put myself in Jasper's place, and receive the punishment, I would gladly do it. But now, just think! I must appear against him—utter words which perhaps will be the very ones to convict him."

In this strain, poor Ruth, the shadow of her once bright self, would pour out her heart to Mildred; until, before the trial came off, the girl-wife had no feeling except one of compassion for the foolish, broken-hearted school-girl.

Court opened on the 21st of June, and the case of the State against Jasper Judson was to be called the following day. Ruth was ill in bed all the first day, greatly prostrated and greatly excited, so that her friends feared for her. The wretched girl—far, far more unhappy than even the pale-faced Mildred whom she begged to remain by her side, and who had

held her hand hour after hour—toward night dropped into a troubled sleep, the effect of an opiate, and Mildred softly releasing her hand went down-stairs and out on the lawn for a breath of fresh air. The sun was setting as she went out; its level rays of gold struck under the elms and lighted up her sad face with their own glory.

She, too, was terribly unnerved by what was coming, and she walked about under the trees for a long time, and finally wandered down to the gate, where she stood, gazing at the faint bars of pink and orange which lay along the twilit horizon, when, as suddenly as if he had risen out of the earth in front of her, some one confronted her on the other side of the gate.

"Mr. Pomeroy?"

"At your service, Mrs. Lovelace—that is your name now, is it not? Please do not run away," grasping one of her hands which was resting on the gate, and holding it by main force. "I want to speak to you about this affair which absorbs the attention of the village. You came here about that, did you not? The murdered man was my friend and your husband, was he not?"

"Why do you ask? Why do you speak to me, who despise you?"

"I saw and recognized you on the porch the day I took refuge here from the thunder-storm. The moment I saw you, it somehow flashed over me what you were here for. It is too bad—quite a dreadful shock! Poor Otis! the most gallant and gay of all the club—what an end for a fellow like him! Are you certain about it, little Mildred?"

"I am absolutely certain, Mr. Pomeroy. I have seen the handwriting of this Mr. Otis, and his cane, and I knew both. Will you let go of my hand?"

"Certainly. But I beg of you to remain a moment longer. I feel dreadfully about this thing—I do, indeed! Otis was a fine fellow. I am sorry for you, too. I want to ask your forgiveness for all my bad conduct to you, to say that I sincerely repent of it—that I have reformed all my bad habits, and that I intend leading the right kind of a life hereafter. Can you be generous enough to forgive me?"

"Did you follow me from Boston to ask that question?"

"No. I swear to you, Mildred, I had not the least idea of where you were or what had become of you, until I saw you sitting on that porch."

"I wish I could believe you, Mr. Pomeroy, but the word of a man who has done what you have done is hardly credible."

"I came to Pentacket with a party of friends who are stopping at the hotel. I did not dream of *your* being here, nor of this sad calamity which brought you, until I saw you last week. Since you are here, I felt constrained to come and assure you of my sympathy and ask your pardon for the past."

"If you are sincere, I grant it. But I do not want you to speak to me again."

"That is a strange quality of forgiveness, Mildred. You might better withhold a boon so ungracious. Mildred, you have seen the worst side of my character; but there is a better side to it. You were so lovely, so beyond all other girls fair and winning, so charming in your loneliness, deserted by one who ought to have thanked Heaven for such a treasure, that I fell desperately in love with you, despite of the fact that it was wicked to do so. Let that go. Forgive it—forget it. I love you still. I cannot believe that you mourn very deeply for one who wedded you on a wager, and who was a stranger to you, and kept himself a stranger. You never had any opportunity to love Otis Garner—he never gave you any. But you are loving and dependent by nature. The wealth of your affection will be a rich gift to some man. Give it to me. You are free now to choose for yourself and to marry your choice. Come, let me atone for my past sin. Let me be your true, fond, devoted lover. Promise me that when

all this trouble is over, you will be my little wife."

He had pushed open the gate and was standing beside her, looking at her earnestly and respectfully, not attempting to touch her. A flash of scorn and almost mirth passed over the lovely face into which he gazed.

"Mr. Pomeroy, has Miss Appleton refused you?"

"Twenty times. She knew that I was after her money. But I *love* you, little Mildred. I am willing to work for *you*. I would not do that for Miss Appleton, splendid as she is. I am trying to reform from all my sins—fortune-hunting, flirting, and all the rest. What could work such a change in me but true love, little one? Tell me that I may hope to restore myself to your favor—that you will sometime marry the man whose memory of your virtues caused him to repent of his bad life."

"I will marry you as soon as you convince me that you have experienced a change of heart, Mr. Hypocrite Pomeroy," responded Milla, with all the contempt she could compress into as few words. "I do not understand your game, but I do know you well enough to understand that you must have some sinister motive in playing the angel to me. I could sooner believe that Satan had 'reformed' than you, sir!" and with a gesture of scorn she turned and went rapidly toward the house.

"Venomous little serpent!" I will tread you under my heel before I allow you to sting me! You will never be satisfied, you little Puritan, until you have ruined my prospects. I must find a way to make you harmless," and, burning with rage, Brummell made his way back to the village, conscious that he had failed to propitiate Mildred, who might now, any day, meet Miss Appleton and betray to her the part he was playing to secure a fortune.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LADY'S KNIGHT IN BLUE SPECTACLES.

ON the morning of the 22d of June Honoria awoke feeling particularly happy and bright. At breakfast she proposed a picnic to the mountain lake, ten miles away, which lay like a diamond in the bosom of the hills, and out of which flowed the Pentacket river. A dozen merry people at once consented to the suggestion. In less than half an hour after breakfast a gay little party was on the way to the mountain. Miss Appleton rode in his open buggy with Mr. Pomeroy; the others all went in a large country wagon. The luncheon was to be sent on after them, after being prepared at the hotel. The morning was soft and delicious, the blue sky filled with an airy fleet of cloud-ships sailing on through the ethereal element with all sails set.

Something like real, pure love anchored in Brummell's cold, calculating, sordid heart as he gazed on the lovely girl by his side. He had begun his love-making to her out of the meanest of motives; yet now he really felt something of the sentiment he had striven to arouse in her.

At the same time he felt a fear—which his egregious disposition had never before permitted him to feel, that he should never succeed in his suit.

The willful, high-spirited, half-coy, wholly delicious young beauty had never in her life been more bewitching. The rude branch of an overhanging tree had torn away her hat, which was now hanging down her back by its long ribbons—the breeze, and the jolting of the wagon over the rough mountain road had brought the rich bloom to her olive-pale cheeks, and shaken out a hundred little wings of dusky hair about neck and brow.

Brummell said a great many tender and meaning things to his beautiful companion, who received them all with such a glitter of laughter and ridicule as made her the more enchanting without giving him one atom of encouragement.

He was half angry and wholly desperate

when they reached the beach, fifteen minutes later than the more lumbering wagon, and were received with arch glances and sly congratulations by the others. Honoria parried these shafts half-disdainfully, half-carelessly. Two hours were spent in rambling, rowing on the lake, fishing, gathering wild flowers, and then all came together to enjoy the luncheon which Honoria had ordered at her own expense and which had come out in a little one-horse vehicle, with two waiters to arrange and dispose of it, and which proved to be an elegant collation, from the cold chicken and champagne to the meringues and ices. Brummell was so teased and annoyed by Honoria's coquetry, that he drank more champagne than was good for him; but he did not show it, and the young lady did not hesitate to accept his offer to row her across the half-mile wide lake to a romantic point which she had expressed a wish to explore.

They went off in a little boat by themselves, and the others thought more than ever that the two were engaged. If Honoria had thought of this she would not have gone, but being in a gay mood she thought little of anything serious.

Brummell—who, among his numerous accomplishments, had been crack oarsman at college—soon took her across the crystal sheet; they landed on a strip of pebbly beach, secured the boat and climbed a high rock, covered with moss and shadowed by evergreens, which hung over the water. Beside the hemlocks which stretched high above them, there was a cluster of bushy evergreens but a few feet high just behind them, as they sat on the rock and waved their handkerchiefs to the party on the opposite shore, who could just make out and return the signal.

Neither of them had the slightest suspicion that some one was on the other side of the thicket, who could hear every word they spoke.

Yet such was the fact.

A young fellow, shabbily dressed, with the reckless, devil-may-care air which some artists take pains to assume, had been sitting there for some time making a sketch in the portfolio which he held on his knee, of the luminous water, with the shadow of the mountains over a part of it. He had observed the doings of the distant picnic party with an indifferent eye; but when voices had floated up to him from near at hand, and he had cautiously thrust his head over the edge of the rock to see if he were to be intruded upon, he had been fascinated by the picture of that beautiful, high-bred girl who sat in the stern of the little boat, dressed in white, with a scarlet shawl or scarf at her feet.

The start, the half-repressed exclamation, the long, eager gaze, proved the power of the lovely stranger's charms to hold the artist's attention. When the voyagers landed, and he found that they were coming up on the rock, he withdrew to the further side of the thicket, pulled his hat well over his eyes and resumed his sketching.

Brummell spread his silk handkerchief between the roots of a hemlock and seated Honoria upon it.

"But we must not stay here over five minutes, Mr. Pomeroy. We were to start for home at three, and it's half-past two now."

"Very well; five minutes are enough, Honoria, for me to tell you again, for the twentieth time, how I love, adore you. Sit still; you must listen to me. I love you. I swear it! I cannot bear this suspense—it is destroying me."

"You do not look badly destroyed," with a little laugh. "You had a famous appetite at luncheon time. Come, we must go."

"Not just yet. Listen. You have laughed at me enough. I am serious, and it maddens me to have you take it so lightly. I swear to you that you are the only woman I ever did, will, or can love. I have been your devoted follower for more than a year. There are plenty of girls in Boston who would not have to be asked twice for me. You can afford to trifle with me, I suppose. But I am getting too much in earnest. Answer me, soberly, once for all—will you be my wife?"

"Why should I answer you soberly," said the girl, mockingly, "when you are far from being strictly sober, yourself?"

"You cannot deny that you have encouraged me."

"You remember 'The Lady's Yes'?"

"Yes, I answered you, last night;

"No, this morning, sir, I say.

Colors seen by candlelight

Will not look the same by day.

"Yet the sin is on us both;

Time to dance is not to woo;

Wooing light makes fickle troth,

Scorn of me recoils on you."

So you see I am no wise bound to give you a serious answer."

"When will you give me a serious answer?"

"Never!"

"You are a flirt, Miss Appleton."

"You are a fortune-hunter, Mr. Pomeroy."

Brummell stole a covert look at his companion. Had that little imp of a Mildred already informed her of what *she* knew about himself? Impossible. There had been no time—no opportunity. Had Honoria grown wise enough to read his character for herself? She sat there, perfectly cool and fearless, with just the least flush of excitement on her cheeks. There was an expression of contempt curling her red-rose-leaf lips which he had never before seen them wear. Could it be that all his gorgeous dreams of a lovely young wife and the mastery of two millions were to fade into blank nothingness? The fear—but far more, perhaps, the champagne—rendered him reckless for one usually so prudent.

"I know what is the matter with you," he said, sneeringly. "Pure and modest as you claim to be, you are still allowing yourself to love a man who has been a married man for more than a year and a half! Don't you know, you little prude, that this indulgence of an unlawful affection is—"

"Beware!" cried Honoria, in a proud, chilling tone, and would have sprung to her feet had he not held her down by placing his hand heavily on her shoulder.

"Remain quiet a minute longer. I won't harm you, sweet Honoria. I must give you a piece of news which I have for some time withheld from you, disliking to pain the girl I loved. I shall no longer be so tender of your feelings. This cousin of yours, of whom you cherish such fond memories, has been dead for six months."

"Dead! Otis, my cousin, dead!"

"Do not stare at me with such wide, incredulous eyes. He is dead, but not buried."

"How?"

"Murdered."

Honoria gave a low scream of surprise and anguish.

The dilapidated artist on the other side of the screen dropped his water-color brush into the moss and pushed his hat back from his forehead, bending, now, closely to listen.

"Oh, do not tell me that Otis is dead! Do not tell me he is murdered. Oh, Mr. Pomeroy, you are saying this to be revenged on me—it is not true."

"Miss Appleton, do you remember the fact that a murder was committed in this little puritanical Pentucket last winter, and that a young fellow, named Jasper Judson, is being tried, this very day, for the deed? You must have heard the affair talked over at the hotel."

"Yes—yes."

"Did it strike you at all forcibly that the name of this murdered schoolmaster was Otis?"

No answer could the girl make, except to look in his cruel face with mute, suffering eyes.

"This Henry Otis was Otis Garner in the character of a New England schoolmaster. I suppose he was trying to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow—or to hide from his silly little wife. It seems he got up a desperate flirtation with the prettiest of his scholars to while away his time and keep his hand in. The girl had another lover whom she refused on Otis' account; the two men ran a race on

the ice last Christmas night, and the teacher never reappeared. This Judson reported that his rival had skated into an air-hole and been drowned; but a bloody knife, a trail of blood on the ice, and other evidence, caused the arrest of young Judson for murder—and his trial began this morning."

Honoria, listening to this story, leaned back against the trunk of the hemlock, pale and faint.

"Oh, take me back," she murmured. "To think I should have been here, gay and happy, while this was going on!"

Brummell looked down into her dim eyes with a smile.

"I will never take you back until you swear to marry me."

"Then I will find my own way, sir." But the shock of the dreadful news she had just heard had taken all her strength, and her voice trembled and her limbs shook.

"No, mademoiselle; we will remain where we are, until our party is alarmed and comes for us. Then I will give them some trifling explanation of our long absence, and you will be sorry you treated with scorn one who prized you so highly."

"Villain!" breathed a voice intense with passion and anger.

But it was not the voice of the helpless girl—oh, no!

Up from behind the piny thicket arose a tall figure in shabby clothes, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat and a pair of blue spectacles. Before the astonished Brummell could square himself for the encounter, the lithe stranger had seized him by the waist, and, with the fiery strength of rage and indignation, hurled him over the edge of the rock into the deep water at its base.

"Thank you, oh, thank you, sir," said Honoria's sweet, tremulous tones. "You are a brave man."

"It is a man's business to defend a lady."

"But oh, sir, is it well to let him really drown?"

"He deserves it!"

"I know he does. Oh, how I despise him! Yet I should be very unhappy to be the means of the death of any fellow-creature—wouldn't you, sir?"

"Then you ask me to risk my life to save his?"

"No indeed. No, I would not have you run the least risk. Your life must be worth a dozen of his—he is only a leech on society at the best."

"I will rescue him, nevertheless, to please you. Also that he may live to realize his own meanness and be ashamed of it."

So saying, the stranger ran lightly down to the beach, pulled off his coat, kicked off his dilapidated slippers—he had no boots, poor fellow!—and plunged in, hat on head and blue spectacles on nose.

In two minutes he was struggling with the drowning dandy, soon coming to shore with the arms of the other about his neck, nearly choking him.

"Stay here, and dry yourself, and repent at leisure," said the rescuer, tossing Brummell into some brushwood, where he lay choking and coughing for some time. "Lady, shall I row you over to your friends?"

Honoria came down, pale and ill, and he assisted her into the boat, wrapped the scarlet shawl about her; and with vigorous strokes drove the light vessel over the lovely water at marvelous speed. Not a word did he speak, until he touched the opposite bank. Friends came running forward to ask what had happened.

"The young lady's escort tumbled off the rock into the lake. He would have been drowned had I not gone to his rescue. I left him to recuperate and brought the lady over, as the excitement had made her ill. I will now return, and if the gentleman is sufficiently revived he can row back; if not, I will bring him over." All this rapidly, after which he pushed off without answering one of the dozen questions addressed to him.

"How prudently he has contrived to avoid scandal and protect me," thought Honoria, with warm gratitude. "I wish I knew who he was!"

She was still pale and agitated, and they made her a cup of coffee by the camp-fire and had another ready for Mr. Pomeroy when he came rowing slowly and feebly back. He was ill and irritable, and would say nothing about the accident. As soon as he had refreshed himself with the hot coffee he was ready to go home; but hardly able to manage a fiery pair of horses; so he rode meekly in the big wagon, while another of her admirers drove his team and sat by Miss Appleton in the buggy.

Brummell followed Honoria about like a dog, after tea, to get an opportunity of speaking with her. She was coldly polite to him in company, to avoid gossip, but would not listen to him privately; however, he got beside her in the hall long enough to say:

"Honoria, dear Honoria, I was drunk or I never should have done what I did. Excuse it, and I will never disgrace myself by too much champagne again."

But she made not the slightest reply to him and hurried on to her own parlor.

Meantime the first day of Jasper Judson's trial had come to a close.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SLEEP-WALKING WITNESS.

MEANWHILE, although these strangers at the hotel had gone off on a picnic on that eventful day, not a citizen of Pentacket left the village except on direst necessity. All were as deeply concerned in the trial as if their own brother were brought up into the prisoner's box on an accusation thus dreadful; for Jasper had been born and bred in that vicinity, and was—or had been—a universal favorite. Many—the most—believed him guilty; but pitied him even while believing it, considering the deed to have been done, without premeditation, in a sudden frenzy of jealousy.

The village was overrun with vehicles coming from all over the country, bringing eager spectators to the court-house, which overflowed with its unwonted crowd, leaving hundreds to accommodate themselves as they could on the "green" which faced it, where only distant echoes could reach them of what was transpiring inside of the building. Men clung to the window-sills, like swarming bees, in the hope of catching a glimpse of the prisoner's face—that young, handsome face, bleached of all its healthy sunburn by six months of confinement in a cell.

If ever conscious innocence sat enthroned on a human countenance you would say it sat on Jasper Judson's brow and shone in the flash of his dark-gray eyes. From the first he had shown contempt for the accusation, the accusers and the consequences. His lawyer, who had in vain tried to persuade him to some line of defense, was astonished at the perfect indifference with which his young client faced the overwhelming danger.

"I believe he would as lief be hanged as not," he had said many times to the anxious father.

It was true. Jasper had given the whole wealth of his young heart into Ruth Fletcher's keeping. From the moment when she had tossed the costly diamond—to purchase which he had sold a favorite horse—with a gesture of scorn, away from her, he had not cared what became of him. His sun had set while it was yet morning. They might end all by killing him—he should not suffer more than in that first hour of loss.

The first day of the trial the time was consumed by the examination of minor witnesses, as to the finding of the knife and glove, the conditions of the skating race, and so forth.

Ruth was not obliged to appear in court that day; but spent the day at home in a state of frightful excitement.

Mildred, as well as her mother, did all they could to quiet the child, and when the long,

weary day drew to a close, and Ruth was in bed, but unable to sleep, Mildred remained with her, talking softly to her, or singing sweet hymns in a low voice to quiet her, as if she, herself, were not also suffering anguish which none knew or dreamed of, enduring the pangs of her husband's death over and over again, as at first.

Finally, about midnight, Ruth fell into a calm slumber. Her breathing was gentle and natural, her pulse less rapid, and she smiled in her dreams. Mildred, quite exhausted, retired, with a light step, to her own room, while the faithful mother, robing herself in a loose dressing-gown, lay down on the lounge in her daughter's room, ready to rise at the slightest summons.

Mrs. Fletcher, however, slept deeply until the rays of the rising sun striking through the parted curtains aroused her to the consciousness that she had lain since midnight without once having been disturbed by a call from Ruth.

Turning her head quickly to see if her daughter were still asleep, she saw Ruth lying peacefully, her eyes wide open and gazing dreamily, with a soft, glorious smile, through the open window, at the distant hills and the golden sunrise.

The breath of morning was fluttering the muslin curtains, and crowds of roses were peeping in the maiden's chamber; while the birds outside were making the trees tremble with a thrill of music. Ruth lay, her poor little wasted hands folded meekly on her bosom, smiling at the beauty and the sweetness of the world, renewed each morning, and at thoughts of her own which had come to take the place of the wild, dark, troubled host which had held her yesterday.

Mrs. Fletcher looked at her young daughter almost with awe. Could it be that Ruth had forgotten that this was the prelude to a dreadful day, when she would have to go into a court-room and give testimony against the son of their neighbor? Or, was the girl's mind wandering?

Hastily rising, she crossed the floor and kissed the pale forehead of the maiden, and spoke to her, more to reassure herself that Ruth was in her right mind than anything else.

"Mother, what a beautiful morning it is," said Ruth, in her old, pleasant voice, looking up into her face with a smile full of hope and joy.

Mrs. Fletcher wondered, but asked no disturbing questions.

All the morning Ruth maintained this newly-found serenity. Yes, even after she was dressed and assisted into the easy carriage, with her mother and Mildred beside her, and on her way to that terrible, long-dreaded court-room.

Ay, even into the room itself, where the cruel, curious eyes of hundreds feasted on her pale, solemn young face.

Only once it failed her, and that was when, in glancing about her, at her novel surroundings, she encountered the blazing, scornful, fiery eyes which shone out of Jasper Judson's changed face. As she met that look of proud disdain she faltered for a moment; at the same time Jasper's expression softened into surprise and sorrow as he saw the fearful havoc which grief had made in that wasted figure and wan face.

Ruth had not been sent for, on account of her feeble state, until they were ready to call her as a witness; so she was not kept waiting, but placed at once at the witness-stand.

Had there been no graver consideration at stake it would have been a frightful trial to a girl's feelings to have her love-affairs exposed to the merciless questioning of the lawyers; but Ruth seemed to be upheld by some mighty power within herself which enabled her to answer calmly questions which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been torturing. All the story of the ring was drawn from her—every word which passed between Jasper and herself that fatal evening; while the counsel for the State, in seeking to find adequate reason for the motive of the inferred murder,

probed her heart to find the state of her feelings for the schoolmaster.

Mrs. Fletcher and Mildred sat near at hand ready to receive the witness when the lawyers should be done with her.

Imagine Mildred's surprise when, in glancing timidly about the court-room, she saw on one of the benches allotted to spectators Honoria Appleton, her vail thrown back and her bright eyes fixed on the witness, her whole expression and attitude exhibiting absorbing interest.

"It must be that she knows who this schoolmaster was," thought Mildred. "I wonder how she came here! How strange!"

"I wonder if she will speak to me! I shall not be sorry to meet her now," thought Mildred, turning frequent glances toward Miss Appleton.

When the examination was over Ruth asked permission to state some facts with regard to the glove and knife which had played so important a part in the testimony. This was readily given her. She then, still under oath, declared that she had placed the knife and glove in their positions, and that the human blood by which the knife was stained and which had fallen on the ice was her own!

Immense sensation.

This immense sensation was followed by a smile of incredulity.

Ruth began to tremble, to flush and pale, and to show embarrassment for the first time. But she steadied her voice and went on:

"I'm telling you the solemn truth, as God is my judge. I will explain how it all happened. The night—that night of Mr. Otis' disappearance—the first thing I thought of when Jasper Judson came back to us, there on the ice, with news that Mr. Otis had gone down under the ice, was that Jasper was in some way responsible for the accident. It seemed to me that he could not have been so far behind his companion that he could not have saved him. I was wild at the thought of Mr. Otis' death, and I arose and accused Jasper, to his face, of being the means of his death. In my excitement and despair I really thought so. I came home, and while the others talked over the affair, I sat silent, brooding over it, and accusing Jasper in my mind. I went to bed when the others did, and after awhile I fell into a sleep, but not a natural sleep. You can ask my father and mother on this point; they will prove to you that I have sometimes—not often—walked in my sleep. I did so that night. I suppose I took my dreadful, revengeful thoughts against Jasper into my sleep. I got up and dressed myself and took Jasper's knife—I had borrowed the knife of him, before I left the house, to fix my skates—make a new slit in the strap, it was—and instead of returning it, I carelessly slipped it into my own pocket. I also took one of Mr. Otis' gloves, which I found on the hall floor, as I came down, and with these, I went noiselessly out of the house, and ran for the ice. When I got there I deliberately made a wound in my left arm, and allowed the blood to trickle out on the ice; I also stained the blade with it; I then placed the glove close to the brink of the hole in the ice, and the knife I threw where it was found. If you ask why I did this strange thing, I cannot further explain it. I can show you the scar of the wound in my arm, and mother can testify that she found it after I was taken so ill, and dressed and cared for it without ever knowing how it came."

The prosecution then asked her "Why, if she had done this thing, she had on the following day accused Jasper Judson, and cried out against him as the murderer?" She answered that all knowledge of what she had done that night had left her mind, and had never returned to it until last night.

That, last night, being very much troubled at the thought of having to testify against her life-long friend, Jasper, she had fallen asleep, and in her dreams the whole matter had been made plain to her—that when she awoke she looked for the scar on her arm, and found it,

and felt a positive certainty of the truth of what she had stated; that a great peace had fallen on her, and she had been comforted and supported since, not only by the consciousness that the most positive proofs against the accused were removed by her own hand, but also, that in her dream it had been revealed to her that Henry Otis was not dead, but alive and well, and within a hundred miles of Pentucket.

The air of perfect faith in what she was saying which Ruth wore, the glow of joy on her wan young face, made a deep impression on many who heard her words; but lawyers take no stock in "the stuff dreams are made of," and cold, incredulous smiles from them chilled the effect which the earnest words of the girl had made on others.

It became whispered about the court-room that Ruth Fletcher had arisen from her long illness not quite right in her mind; and looks of pity and curiosity were fastened upon her. Altogether, that which she had testified, with the simple faith that it would at once set Judson free, went rather against him than for him, so it was accepted only as the excited imagination of a diseased brain.

She was cross-examined very slightly, it being taken for granted that the testimony of a person in Miss Fletcher's condition of mind must be worthless.

There were a number among the audience, however, who implicitly believed what she had said. Among these was Honoria Appleton, who had come to this public place from no morbid curiosity, but in an agony of grief and suspense, and quite certain that her cousin was the victim of whose death the prisoner stood accused. Something of the pale anguish of her face went away when Ruth stated that she had, in her dream, received the assurance that Otis was yet alive. She felt the truth of the girl's story about the placing of the knife and glove in her sleep, and a great hope sprung up in her breast that Otis might, after all, be alive.

After this she had time to wonder how it was that Mildred appeared on the scene; and when, the cross-examination over, and Ruth's mother's testimony—which corroborated her daughter's as to the wound on Ruth's arm—having been taken, the Fletchers and Mildred left the court-room, Honoria hastened from her place, and met them just outside the door.

"Milla! Milla! stay a moment. How came you here?"

"I read of this in the papers, Miss Appleton, and I knew, in a moment, that this Henry Otis was *our* Otis. Could I help coming?"

Mildred, in the agitation of the moment, had forgotten that Miss Appleton was not supposed to be aware of her identity.

"You did right to come, Milla, of course. You could not stay away. I know who you are, dear Milla, and how you loved him—for you left your diary with me, you know, and I had to look in it for some clue to the owner of so much property as had been abandoned on my hands. Yes, dearest, who has a sad right to be here, if not Otis' wife?"

"Did you say his wife?" interrupted Ruth, hastily.

"Yes. Miss Fletcher, this lady is Otis' wife, and I am his cousin. His true name was Henry Otis Garner. He had trouble with his uncle, and dropped the family name, I suppose, when he went out to earn his own—"

Miss Appleton came to a full stop in her explanation, for Ruth, with a low moan, had thrown herself on her mother's breast and sunk into a swoon.

They carried her into the hotel across the way, where she was, after an alarming time, revived.

Honoraria and Mildred had gone with the mother, and remained until Ruth recovered.

"Why did you not tell me you were his wife?" was her first question, as her dim eyes turned reproachfully to Mildred.

"I did not think you strong enough to bear the shock; nor that it would be necessary you

should ever know, seeing that he was dead, and would never—"

"But he is not dead," almost shrieked Ruth, "I saw him last night, and I tell you, *he is alive!* Mother! mother! take me home. Take me away from these fine ladies, whom *he* loves. The very sight of them is death to me!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ROSES IN PRISON.

THE trial ran a rapid course, for on the third day it was ended. No proof that Jasper Judson had committed murder could be adduced, except such circumstantial evidence as the reader has heard. This, throwing out Ruth's testimony—which the judge, in his charge to the jury ordered them to do, saying that the girl was probably partially demented—was very strong against the prisoner; anyhow, the jury seemed to have made up its mind before the first day of the trial was over, that he was guilty; and on the third day, after only half an hour's deliberation, it returned with a verdict of "manslaughter," as the judge had charged them that the killing of the teacher under the "emotional insanity" caused by a sudden paroxysm of jealousy, could be construed into manslaughter, rather than willful murder.

So Jasper Judson was remanded to the county jail until the following week when he was to be removed to the State's prison, there to endure an imprisonment of ten years—the judge, moved by pity for the heart-broken parents and the youth of the prisoner, making the term as brief as he dared, considering the character of the crime.

The excitement in Pentucket was by no means over with the trial.

Ruth Fletcher's statements were credited by many who knew her, and visiting her house saw no evidences of unsound mind.

It was a tid-bit for gossip, too, that the schoolmaster, though never mentioning the fact, had been a married man. This had leaked out through some bystanders who had overheard the conversation at the court-house door.

This fact greatly increased the sympathy for Jasper Judson. Guilty or not, it was considered too bad that Mr. Otis should have allowed his jealousy to arise against him when he was a married man. Poor Jasper began to loom before their eyes in the light of a martyr. There was talk of a petition to have the case retried.

There was also a keen curiosity to see the wife of the missing teacher. Rumors of her marvelous beauty, and of the fabulous wealth and power of the Garner family to which the schoolmaster belonged, deepened the interest in the romance of real life. Miss Appleton, who had been before the great lion of the place, was now the object of deepest interest.

She herself, with her beauty, style, fashion and wealth, was a living witness to the splendors that waited on the Garners.

Everybody declared that he, or she, had always known that Mr. Otis was some prince in disguise; his air of elegance, his haughty reserve, his diamond sleeve buttons, had betrayed that. But the heartfelt sympathy was for Jasper and his parents.

The second day after his sentence, at about five in the afternoon, Jasper was told that a visitor waited outside for permission to enter his room. This was not a novel occurrence—since dozens of people had already tried the patience of the jailer, either asking permission to visit the prisoner, or sending in little gifts of choice cookery, books, or flowers.

His room was not a very unpleasant place, being lighted thoroughly by two good-sized windows, its walls hung with engravings, placed there by his mother, and his little table covered with books and bouquets; but it was a prison, and there were iron bars over those windows which destroyed the charm of the free sunlight.

The jailer did not say who it was that was

waiting outside; so that Jasper was completely surprised, as he raised his heavy eyes, to see standing before him, wan and white as a spirit, her wasted hands clasping a great bunch of roses, mignonette and heliotrope, her great brown eyes fixed piteously upon him as if beseeching him not to strike her to the floor, Ruth Fletcher.

"Jasper!" she began, when he gazed sternly upon her without a word of welcome, "Jasper, I have come to beg you to forgive me for ruining your life in every way, as I have done."

Still his stern eyes looked on her coldly, and his compressed lips did not open either to welcome her or utter the word of pardon.

Slowly, slowly, never taking her piteous eyes from his countenance, she sunk on her knees, her trembling hands letting fall in a shower over her white dress the perfumed blossoms as she stretched them out to him.

"Jasper," she beseeched, with a sad humility, overflowed by a strange current of irrepressible passion, "do forgive me! See, I humble myself at your very feet. If I could undo what I have done I would think nothing of being laid away in my grave after it. I alone am to blame for all this terrible state of affairs. I am the sole author of all the trouble. If I had not been vain I should not have thought that the teacher loved me; if I had not been false, I should not have scorned you, whom I prized before, and turned to him. Mr. Otis never loved me—never cared for me—Jasper, did you know he was a married man before ever we saw him?"

"I heard, yesterday, that such was the story"—his voice was chilling, his stern eyes seemed to smile a little at the idea of her mortification when she heard of this.

"When I look back, I can see that he never made love to me. It was only his gallant, flattering city manners which made me believe myself the favored one. Oh, Jasper, do you not pity me for my share of this trouble? Think of the humiliation I must suffer when I think of my foolish conduct, and what he must have thought of me. It half kills me to recall it. But it is not for myself I have any pity. My punishment I can bear. It is your suffering that is gnawing at my heart. I have blighted your life, crushed, disgraced you. I have thrown you into prison. I am the means of your long, cruel sentence. But you shall not endure that! You are innocent—innocent I will yet prove it to them. More than that, Mr. Otis is alive. I see him in my dreams every night. They say I am insane; but you do not think so, do you, Jasper?"

"No," said he, "you are not insane. I, too, feel that that man is alive. Why, look at it! They have never found his remains! Could they walk out of the river of themselves? Men are fools, after all."

"Yes, Jasper, he is alive, and I will find him."

Something like a halo shone about her wan face.

Jasper looked at her, kneeling there to him. Her lovely dimples, her rosy bloom, her gold-threaded chestnut curls were gone.

Her young form was wasted to a shadow, her sweet mouth was pale, her eyes shone out of dark hollows in her white face, but never, in the days of his glad boy passion, had Ruth been so lovely to him as then, kneeling to him in his prison room.

He could not forgive her—no, no, he could never forgive her! but he loved her with a wild, terrible love that battled fiercely with his anger and jealousy. When he heard her say—"He is alive and I will find him," the old pangs of jealousy tore at his heart-strings and he answered her:

"No, do not look for him. I would rather pine in prison than have you meet that man again. Let him go."

For a moment Ruth wondered; then a sad smile came about her lips.

"You think I would come under his influence again, Jasper—that all the old vanity and folly would revive? No; you are mistaken. My love was almost dead before I

heard that little lady avow herself his wife; at that news it gasped and drew its last breath. It would be as impossible for me, now, to love this Otis Garner as for a fiend to enter the gates of heaven!"

"Ruth, get up from off your knees. I do not like you to kneel to me, and that floor is no place for one in your health."

"Tell me first, Jasper, that you forgive me."

"You ask a great deal, Ruth. Will you not give me time to think over your petition? It is not so easy to forgive, all in a moment."

"I care not for a cold, calculating forgiveness. If it came from your heart, one second would be time enough."

"It was—it is. Ruth, I forgave you the moment my eyes rested on you in the court-room, and I saw how you had suffered."

"Oh, Jasper, is this true?"

"Yes, I forgave you, even when I thought that your illness was caused by grief for another and not for me."

"Jasper, you are noble, generous—the same boy you always have been."

She picked up a few of the sweetest flowers, arose from her knees, and approached him to give him the blossoms.

As he took them he grasped the little hand that held them, and looked hard into her face.

"Will you think of me summer evenings, Ruth, when the breath of roses is sweet all about you, and I am languishing in prison?"

She burst into tears, sobbing pitifully.

"You shall not go to that place, Jasper. You shall not! Or, if they are so cruel as to take you, I shall ask father and mother to go and live near that prison, and I will visit you every day, and bring you roses winter and summer."

"Then I shall be quite willing to go, Ruth."

"I shall live there near you, and bring you flowers, and write you letters, and prove to you how patient and faithful I can be. I will never desert you; I will show you that I am no longer a vain and silly school-girl. Then, perhaps—Jasper, perhaps—when those ten long, cruel years are passed, and you find me waiting at your prison door, you will be willing to—to place confidence in me again, and to let me—love you—as you once loved me."

She hid her tear-dimmed eyes in the roses, then looked timidly into his face, and smiled and blushed.

"Will you—ever—let me love you, Jasper?"

"I will think about it," he answered, slowly, without even a smile. "Remember, I shall have ten years in which to make up my mind;" but there was a glow deep down in his eyes which reassured Ruth and made her feel that she should be strong to wait and hope.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"DREAMING, SHE KNEW IT WAS A DREAM."

At Honoria's urgent request Mildred had gone home with her to her rooms in the hotel, feeling that perhaps she would not be welcome now at the Fletchers, and seeing no reason why she should not confide everything to Miss Appleton, now that that young lady knew who she was.

If these two girls had been friends, when Mildred had sought the heiress in the humble guise of a companion, they were all the warmer friends now that their relations were understood.

Honoria immediately began to call Mildred "cousin"—"for," as she argued, "you are my cousin by marriage, you know"—and then the young wife would blush, and look in wonder at the regal young creature who could so well control her own feelings, and act so generously to a poor little friendless thing who had usurped the place Mildred had.

"You know I am not really his wife," she would say. "The marriage ceremony was performed, but it was only a mockery to him, and as he has never lived with me, I can have the formal tie dissolved at my pleasure; and, cousin Honoria, I shall dissolve it this autumn coming."

For Mildred could be generous, too. She could not forget the smothered passion, the hidden yet ever-revealed fire, with which Honoria had talked of her absent cousin, of the injustice which had been done him, and the pain it was to her to be the owner of *his* money and house, while he wandered homeless.

Strangely enough both girls took it for granted that Otis was alive. They as fully believed Ruth's assertion that she had seen him alive and well, in a vision, as if she had seen him in her waking senses. Mildred had taken off her hateful mourning, and bloomed out in the dresses Otis had given her.

As for Brummell Pomeroy, seeing Mrs. Garner quite at home with Miss Appleton, at the hotel, he had thought it time to betake himself to "fresh fields and pastures new," and was quickly away to Newport, where there was a young blood of his acquaintance ready to be fleeced. The first time his name was mentioned between them Mildred related her experience of his character and the circumstances which had driven her from Miss Appleton so unceremoniously. As this black picture of the elegant man-of-fashion agreed with the new ideas Honoria had formed of him, the girls agreed to drop him from their books, from their talk and from their thoughts.

The Monday after the week of the trial Miss Appleton established her aunt in a quiet private family, paid her hotel bills and departed for Boston with Mildred, the latter having first paid a good-by visit to the Fletchers, where she was surprised at the warmth of feeling which Ruth betrayed.

"Your husband will come back very soon, and you will be happy yet," were the last words Ruth said to her.

Ruth Fletcher was forced, afterward, to doubt this assurance which she had given so earnestly.

Nothing was heard of Otis Garner.

The day came when Jasper Judson—a year ago the gayest, most spirited and most envied young man in Pentacket—the one who always had spending-money for frolics—who drove the finest horses—who owned the handsomest buggy—who had the most dashing manners and the most "splendid" eyes, was taken, hand-cuffed from the jail to the cars and under the care of the sheriff was conveyed from the scenes of his youth to the cold gloom of the penitentiary. There were not many dry eyes among the girls of Pentacket that day.

The young men of the place formed themselves into an escort and followed the sheriff and his prisoner to the station.

Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher brought their daughter, at her demand, and she was on the platform when Jasper was brought there.

"If I cannot make my promise true to produce Otis Garner alive, then father and mother have promised to take me to live near you, Jasper," she said, as she held his hand and looked up wistfully into his eyes.

Jasper's young friends, and old ones, too, all assured him that a movement was to be made for a new trial; all cheered him with assurances of their belief in his innocence and of his speedy release; but the fact remained that he stood there disgraced, handcuffed, on his way to prison; and the smoldering fire in his haughty glance told how deeply he resented the position in which he had been placed.

The cars stopped at Pentacket station, and he went to endure his doom.

In a few days the excitement died away in the little village. Girls laughed and blushed and made themselves pretty to please their admirers; young men went about their morning work and their evening enjoyments scarcely calling to mind that their former comrade was eating prison fare and fretting his heart out in a prison-cell.

People began to think that Ruth Fletcher had either purposely falsified in her testimony, or that she had been a little "touched" when she gave her account of her sleep-walking expedition, and her promise that the supposed murdered man should soon reappear.

It seemed highly improbable that if Otis Garner had been, at the time of the trial, with-

in one hundred miles of Pentacket he would not have heard of the trial and either written or come himself to free an innocent man from so terrible a charge. Yet he had not appeared, nor did any amount of advertising bring any tidings of him.

At first Ruth was wonderfully sustained by her own faith in the vision she had seen. But as days and weeks dragged slowly away her confidence began to fail.

She wandered silently about the large house, the lawn, the orchard, by the brook, more like a ghost than a living girl. Her parents did not know what to do. She constantly besought them to break up their home, and take her to live near Jasper. Twice in the first month she gave David money to pay a visit to Jasper and take him flowers and messages from her. It was a hard thing for Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher to break up their old home, and to try to make a new one in the city; but to save the life and the reason of their dear and only daughter they would do all in their power; so they finally promised her that when the fall crops were harvested they would do as she wished.

Then Ruth lived only on this prospect of the future.

She counted the long, hot, weary days, and when one was gone she would think: "I am so much nearer to him whom I wronged, and who is suffering for me."

Time had dragged on until the last day of August.

It had been a month of drought and heat—of glare and dust and steady brilliancy of burning skies over the parched earth;

"Nor bird would sing, nor lamb would bleat,
Nor any cloud would cross the vault,
But day increased from heat to heat,
On stony drought and steaming salt."

Parched as everything was, this last day of summer, out-of-doors, the lonely house was still more dreary to Ruth than the hot stubble-fields and the wasted brook. After the noon dinner she tied on her broad-brimmed school hat and set out for one of her long, aimless rambles. She followed the little stream, which in spring had been a glad and noisy torrent, where it crept, shallow and slow, between two wheat-fields whose stubble shone like gold under the burning sun, until it came into the maple-grove, where it lingered and gathered strength on its bed of green mosses and glistening pebbles, dallying with the long grasses, and kissing the blue wood-violets.

Ruth had still but little strength, and when she had gone into the grove, where it was just a trifle cooler than under the cloudless azure sky, she was exhausted, and threw herself down on the bank, where the grass was short and dry, to rest, and watch the ripple and the slender silver stream. Unconsciously she fell into a quiet slumber. Then, as on that night before she gave her testimony in court it seemed to her that Mr. Otis came to her, bent over her, touched her hand, and said to her: "See, Ruth, I am not dead after all!"

"Dreaming, she knew it was a dream;
She felt he was and was not there.
She woke: the babble of the stream
Fell,"

and gradually she became conscious that some one was bending over her—that some one did hold her little thin hand—and that a voice, whose lightest cadence once thrilled to the deepest depths of her foolish heart, was saying, half gayly, half tenderly:

"Wake up, little Ruth, wake up, and give me welcome!"

She sat up quickly; her large, startled eyes, shining out of their dark hollows in her wasted face, rested on the one she had so long looked for.

"Thank God!" she murmured, solemnly, meeting the grave black eyes that looked at her with some curiosity.

"What for, pretty Ruth? Because the scapegrace has returned to give an account of himself?"

"Yes, Mr. Otis, just for that."

"But what is the matter, with you, Ruth. You are so changed, I had to look hard at you

a good five minutes before I was certain it was you. Have you been ill?"

"Yes, Mr. Otis, ever since we lost you."

She spoke very solemnly; there were none of the old blushes, smiles, or little coquettices of look and speech.

"Did my running away have anything to do with it?" he continued, after an instant's hesitation.

"Then you *did* run away, Mr. Otis?"

"Certainly; what did you think had become of me?"

"Everybody thought you were dead—some that you were drowned—more that you were murdered and thrown under the ice in the river. Did you not know that Jasper Judson had been arrested for your murder—that he lay in jail six months awaiting his trial—that he was tried last June, and *convicted*—and that he is now enduring his sentence in State's prison?"

"Poor Jasper! As God is my judge, Ruth, I never thought of or suspected such serious consequences from my freak to disappear, and so get rid of some troubles that were depressing my spirits at that time. It was very thoughtless, very wicked of me. I see it all now. I did hear something about it, the very day the trial opened. I was at the lake, on a sketching tour, when some persons from the hotel came there on a picnic, and I overheard two of them—acquaintances of mine—talking over the matter. I was shocked, and intended immediately to present myself at Pentacket. But now, hear on what trifles hang the fate of mortals. The fellow who was with the young lady, on the opposite side of the lake from the rest of the party, proposed, out of revenge for her rejection of his suit, to keep her there until their absence created a scandal. I overheard his threat, and being disguised by blue glasses, and so forth, so that I could not fear recognition, I sprung out and tumbled him into the lake. Then I had to rescue him, or be guilty of murder. All drenched as I was, I had to row the young lady across the lake to her friends, and return. Somehow, I took cold. I have done similar feats before without taking cold; but I was tired, hungry, and not just in a state for such risks. I went to the cabin where I had been living all summer—a deserted log-house in the forest of which I had taken possession, as I was not able to pay board, and where I cooked my own food and washed my own shirts—made up a fire on the hearth, drew a cup of tea, drank it, and went to my bed of hemlock boughs, half unconscious from the effects of a severe chill. Dear Ruth, will you believe me, that I lay sick in that hut for over six weeks, some days not able to help myself to a drink of water, on others, just making out to crawl to the spring on my hands and knees, and to make a little fire and some tea or coffee, and toast some of the ship's biscuits, of which I had a keg full. I used to think that my skeleton would be found there some day, and furnish the mountain with its own mystery. It happened that no one came near in all that time, though I frequently heard the guns of sportsmen not far away. Fortunately, my splendid constitution carried me through. I say, 'fortunately,' not because my poor life is worth anything to anybody; but because my return to civilization will be the means of restoring an innocent man to his freedom and good name. I was too delirious, some of the time, to realize anything about what I heard of my supposed murder; then, when I would come to my senses, I would be quite desperate thinking of what depended on my getting well. I thank God, too, Ruth, as earnestly as you did. It was a thoughtless, reckless trick of mine, running away as I did."

"Yes it was, Otis Garner; it has made more sorrow and trouble than you can dream of. You see what it has done to me; and it nearly killed your wife, also, and made sorrow and trouble for your cousin."

"My wife?"

"Yes; we know all about you now, Mr. Garner, and we love your sweet, beautiful

little wife. She came here, in deep mourning, to attend the trial. She has returned to Boston, now."

"Did you know how I came to marry her?"

"No—nothing about that."

"I will tell you sometime; you are too agitated now. You tremble like a leaf. Come, let me help you to the house."

Pentacket, brooding in the hot sunshine, with all business as nearly suspended as possible, was destined to awake from siesta that afternoon with a shock that made her forget the heat, and gave her a new topic of conversation. Like the rush of a tempest the news flew from house to house, setting voices to quavering and hearts to beating high.

"Otis Garner is at the house of Mr. Fletcher, alive and well!"

Not well, exactly; but well enough to come to the porch and show himself to the excited crowds that gathered there within an hour of the time when he led Ruth home from her forest ramble.

It was not enough for these good people, who had been put to so much trouble on his account, to see the schoolmaster standing before them; they called for an explanation of his sudden disappearance; and if he had haughtily refused to give it, there is no certainty but that the proud Bostonian would have been treated to a coat of tar and feathers.

But Otis felt quite humble in view of all the harm he had done, and was willing to explain himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE HARVEST MOONLIGHT.

OTIS was pale with excitement as he stood before the crowd.

"You must do me the justice, friends, to believe that I never had the faintest idea of the disastrous results of such a freak, when I suddenly, in a single moment of time—on that Christmas night, when I passed Judson in the race, and found myself, on turning a bend of the river, completely out of sight—resolved to lose myself and never again be found by any of my acquaintances.

"Why I made this resolution is a private matter which I have a perfect right to keep to myself, as it relates entirely to my family affairs. I was not happily situated; school-teaching was a new business to me, and irksome; I had in my pocket my last quarter's salary; and a new trouble, which I had not before dreamed of, had arisen that very evening, to make me still more discontented with my situation here. Unwittingly—not having seen proper to state, on my coming here, that I was a married man—I had made trouble between two young people, both of whom I admired and liked. I thought the easiest way out of everything was just to disappear. I believed it would make no difference to any one if it were taken for granted that I was drowned in the ice-hole. I meant it to be so apprehended. I was quite willing my relatives should believe me dead, and I did not think any one in Pentacket would care particularly. With these thoughts crowding into my brain, I turned and made a sudden dart for the shore, and crept behind the clump of bushes just as Judson turned the bend. I silently freed myself from my borrowed skates, watching my rival's movements as I did so. When he started back for help, I ran across fields, keeping out of sight of the skating-party, by skirting fences and dodging from bush to tree, and tree to bush. I made for the railroad station on the edge of the village. When I reached it there was no one about except the station-master, whom I could see, through the window, toasting his feet by the stove. I crept behind a pile of empty dry goods boxes. I knew a train for Boston would soon be due. When it came along and stopped, I contrived to get on the rear platform of the last car without being seen. I remained on the platform and was not overhauled by

the conductor or brakeman until we had stopped at the next village. There I slid off and entered a passenger car in the regular manner, paid my fare to Boston, and rode till we stopped in the city. No one had recognized me. I strolled, in the gray winter morning, down to the docks and took cheap passage in a sailing-vessel for Key West. I made myself so useful to the captain that he refunded my money before we reached Florida.

"Not to be tiresome, I found a way to live economically in the South, and remained there until nearly the first of June, never meeting any of my friends, because, if I saw one, I took myself away betimes. Then I grew homesick and returned North, arriving in Boston in June, and going to call on a favorite cousin at my old home, found the house shut and she gone for the summer, I did not learn where. I was pretty poor by this time; and I furnished a portfolio and started out on a sketching tour, having once had a great taste for painting.

"Not a word did I hear of the drama enacting in Pentacket, until a few weeks ago, and then I was taken ill alone in a mountain hut where I could not communicate with you. As soon as I could crawl, I started to undo, as far as possible, the mischief my adventures had wrought to others—and here I am, thankful that it is not too late to—that it is no worse."

His voice trembled as he concluded, and he looked so sorry and so sad, and his garments were so threadbare, and his fine, patrician features so pale, that, in a moment, by the magic of his quivering lips, the tide turned, and the people forgave and pitied him, testifying to their sympathy by one rousing cheer for him, and three and a tiger for Jasper Judson—after which they dispersed to wear out their excitement by degrees.

In three days from that a mighty delegation of almost the whole county awaited, at the station, the arrival of the falsely-condemned, who had been set at liberty as quickly as possible.

The appearance of Jasper Judson on the platform, as he descended from a train, and stood, rather grave and pale, before them, was the signal for such a burst of welcomes, cheers and congratulations as nearly overwhelmed him.

Then some of his young friends took him on their shoulders and carried him the whole long mile and a quarter to the home where his poor mother, weeping with joy, stood on the steps to receive him.

But first, in passing the Fletcher homestead, they had tarried at the gate, and called out Ruth. She came forth, dressed in white, weeping and smiling, bringing him a great handful of her choicest flowers; but Jasper refused them, turning white with anger, when he saw who walked by Ruth's side.

Then Otis, seeing this little misunderstanding arising, stepped quickly up, wrung Jasper's hand, and whispered in his ear:

"She would not have me now, if I were free, and asked her a thousand times. She has grown wise and knows better who is worthy of her. She has confessed to me that 'She loves you for the dangers you have passed,' and now you must love her, that she did pity them. Jasper Judson, I thank God in my heart every minute that matters are no worse than they are!"

Then Jasper stretched out his hand and took the flowers he would have refused, and Ruth lifted up her sweet, clear eyes and looked into his with a look that betrayed her heart; and she said, with a joyful smile:

"I told you, Jasper, that you would come back to us before long! You see my vision was a prophetic one! People have laughed at me and dubbed me a little lunatic; but I knew what had been revealed to me in my sleep was true."

But the merry crowd would not let them talk longer, bearing Jasper forward to the mother whom they knew was waiting to gladden her tear-dimmed eyes with the sight of her boy.

That evening Jasper left his parents about

nine o'clock, and took a path across the fields—running through dew-scented second crops of clover and rustling corn—toward the house of farmer Fletcher.

As he came out on the lawn he saw Ruth, with a light scarf wound about her head and shoulders, walking up and down the porch.

In a moment he was by her side, her cold little hand clasped in his warm, strong one.

"Ruth, where is Mr. Otis?"

"Gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes; he took the seven o'clock train for Boston. I think there is some one there whom he is in a hurry to see. He only awaited your arrival, to be here to welcome you, and to be sure that all was right. He left his love for you; and says that you shall hear from him soon by letter."

"Ruth, let me see your face by this fair moonlight. You have suffered, my darling, I know."

"But it is all over now, Jasper. I would suffer it all over again to have you speak so kindly to me. Do you really mean that you feel toward me as you used before this trouble began?"

"Not quite that way, Ruth. I can never be the thoughtless, happy boy I was then. But my love, my little dear, has only become the stronger and firmer. I know what it means now to give all my hopes of happiness into the hands of another; and I yield them to you, Ruth, more solemnly, more sacredly, than I would once have done. I believe that you, too, are more certain of yourself; and that we have less to fear from each other's lightness and changeableness than we once had. So, sweetest, I believe that we may yet be very happy together."

"You are very generous, Jasper, to the foolish girl who once betrayed your trust; but you have your reward: there is not a man in the world who could make me think he was your equal."

And, as they walked up and down in the full glory of the harvest moon, these young hearts built up an ideal happiness on a far firmer foundation than that of their boy and girl dreams.

One foolish girl-heart had broken away from the chains of fancy which had bound it to Otis Garner, and had moored itself in the quiet haven of its childhood's home. The proud, dark beauty of the haughty scion of the Garner tree had no longer any charm, in Ruth's eyes, comparable to that she found in the frank, honest, handsome face of her young lover.

CHAPTER XXV.

ROSES IN OCTOBER.

A COLD, dull, sickening fear had for many days and nights been growing upon Honoria Appleton. She looked with wonder on little Mildred, to think she could keep up her sparkling spirits in the face of the fact that weeks had elapsed since Judson had gone to State's prison, and yet no tidings had come to any one to prove the existence of her cousin.

Many times Honoria longed to warn the wife not to hope so fondly—not to put such confidence in the vision of a sickly girl; but Mildred was so busy with her books, music and painting; so almost sublime in the stern resolution which she kept to herself—that when Otis did come, she would go, and would free him from his bonds and leave him at liberty to be happy with his splendid cousin—that she dreaded to disturb her with the preying misery of her own fears.

The two girls were keeping house in the old family mansion; in a very private way, keeping the front shutters closed that they might not be intruded upon by chance acquaintances, the most of the heiress' aristocratic friends still staying in the mountains or at the seaside. Mildred wanted to go away, feeling a great delicacy about being found in that house when Otis should arrive.

But Honoria would not listen to her, asking what she would do, left all alone, with only servants, in that great mansion. So Mildred

yielded, according to her nature, and remained, while Honoria did not say to her that she felt there would never be any reason for her going away.

One hot and dusky August day the fair young mistress of the mansion had exhibited a deep melancholy all day, which had the effect to depress the hopeful spirits of her friend.

Finally, not daring to put her despondency into plainer expression, Honoria came down to tea dressed all in black.

Mildred looked at her in surprise which deepened to consternation, then glanced down at her own white robe and the pink carnations in her bosom, while the tears sprung to her eyes.

Neither of the girls did more than pretend to drink their tea. As they were leaving the room the little wife wound one white arm about her companion's waist.

"You think he is dead," she whispered.

"Yes. But it may be because I am not quite well. My head aches; and so I look at things with gloomy eyes."

"Shall I go and put on my black dress, too?"

"Not to-night. I prefer to see you as you are. So long as you have hope I shall not quite despair."

They turned into the music-room. There were a few wax candles lighted here, whose silvery luster hardly intruded upon the flood of glorious moonlight which fell in crystal cataracts through two tall windows opening to the south, deluging the lovely room with radiance.

Mildred sat down to the piano, touched the keys with a fairy touch, and began to sing to herself in low, soft tones mournful songs of sorrow and passion. A broad stream of moonlight lay over her slender, exquisite little figure, and lighted up her fair, pure face till it was like the face of an angel. Honoria could not bear even this sweet company, wandering off into the great drawing-room, faintly lighted by a single moonlight globe, and the mystic light which fell through one window to the south.

Here she paced up and down, the long train of her black dress trailing after her, not one jewel lighting up the dusk of her streaming hair, which she had let down because its weight was too oppressive to her aching head.

Suddenly she paused, clasping her hands, and falling back a step with a gesture that would have become a queen of tragedy, but with her wholly unpremeditated. The door-bell had sounded, and for some reason, which she did not herself comprehend, the summons was full of meaning—like the cry of a friend in danger. She stood still and listened.

The old servitor was speaking with some one at the door; then the door closed, and as nothing now was heard, she was about to resume her walk when the door from the hall softly opened and some one stepped into the room.

"Honoria, is it you?"

"Otis! Oh, thank God, you have come at last!"

Their voices were vibrant with deep emotion, but not loud, and the sweet singer in the music-room adjoining—the folding-doors open between the two rooms—heard nothing, and went on with her low, sad, heart-touching singing.

Otis held out his arms and his cousin rushed into them. He kissed her and she returned his kiss.

"I could not stay away longer, cousin; the call of my heart was too powerful. It is wrong to be here—it is against the voice of pride and the sense of duty—but I had to come, or die. There, now, I have frightened you, sweet!"

"You have," answered Honoria, tearing herself from his arms. "It does frighten me to hear you say such things. I was so glad to see you, alive, whom we mourned as dead, that I remembered only that you were my dear cousin—my own cousin, ever dear, ever an object of the deepest interest to me, but my cousin only. Otis, dear, where have you been?"

Why did you allow us to suffer so much in the fear that you were dead?"

"Allow us? Who is 'us,' may I ask? 'Hush! speak and move very softly, and I will show you,' leading him toward the folding-doors, and signing him to look into the music-room.

He did look a long, long time, very silently. Honoria could not guess what thoughts were passing through his brain.

The picture in the music-room was one upon which the most indifferent person might gaze, if only for its beauty. The silver-falling moonlight, mingled with the soft glow of the wax candles, illuminated the place with a mystic light that made more lovely its beautiful adornments, and wrapped in a magic spell the fair creature at the piano.

Absorbed in her own thoughts, pouring out her own soul in thrilling whispers to the responsive instrument, Mildred sat in that white moonlight like a fairy inside the ring of a falling fountain. Her soft, translucent white dress fell about her perfect little figure; her white arms were bare, her wonderful gold hair glittered about her shoulders and fair throat. There were carnations in this hair and on the soft bosom, trembling to the music of the rose-sweet lips.

Mildred did not look the child she had been when the man who now silently gazed at her saw her last. As pure, as innocent, was that dreamy, beautiful face, but it wore a look of dignity, of quiet endurance, of pathetic womanhood which had come to it through many trials.

Nothing lovelier was ever seen on earth than Mildred sitting there in the moonlight, breathing out her loving soul in sweetest melodies. Honoria gazed on her, too, with as fascinated a look as her cousin.

Finally Otis turned and searched the dark beauty of the face beside him, as if comparing it with that ethereal loveliness of the other young creature at the piano.

"I am not so beautiful as she is," whispered Honoria. "Look at her! pure as an angel, lovely as a lily in its first bloom. That treasure is yours, Otis! Thank heaven for it! Otis, look at her—she is your wife—she loves you—adores you. Do not cast away the pearl of all your tribe!"

So saying his peerless cousin vanished from his side. He looked around for her, but she was gone.

Yes, brave, noble Honoria, speaking in the interests of honor and of her friend—crushing her own heart to do it—had fled to the sacred solitude of her own room.

There, throwing herself on the floor, in the tender moonlight, long did she wrestle with her own passionate nature; until, utterly wearied out with the long struggle and with the darting pangs that tore her head as well as heart, she at last sobbed herself to sleep, without even a pillow under her aching head. But she awoke the conqueror. Gone was the racking pain in her temples—gone the more terrible pain in her heart. Long since had she given up her cousin to this other woman who loved him so and who had the right to love him. But his sudden appearance, his passionate words, had brought back her old feelings, and she had the battle all to fight over again.

Once more she was at peace. As she rose from her hard couch she perceived that there had been a light rain in the latter part of the night; the air coming in at her window was sweet and refreshing; she dressed herself calmly, without the help of her maid—for it was still very early—and then sat and read her prayer-book and considered what she could do to make others happy; until her maid came and was surprised to find her up.

Then the summons to breakfast came, and she went down, pale, but becoming.

Alas, the house was desolate.

Otis had gone away about an hour after she left him, the servant who had let him out of the door said; and Mrs. Garner had gone off, early this morning, and had not yet returned.

"This is intolerable," thought Honoria. "She has gone and left me alone in this great house. Go up to Mrs. Garner's room," she ordered the servant, "and see if there is a note on her table for me."

The servant returned with a note. She hastily opened it, and read:

"DEAR FRIEND:—Otis asked me to live with him; but I did not believe that his heart was in his words. I do not think it delicate for me to remain in your house, under the circumstances. With ten thousand thanks for your love and noble kindness, I bid you good-by for the present. I am going back to Pentacket. I think Mrs. Fletcher will be glad to see me, and I am sure I can do a little something to pay for my board. Fondly, your MILLA."

So Honoria was forsaken; nor could Otis come freely to see her, for it was in the will that he should never so much as take a meal in the house.

Mildred had left him her bank-book with word that she should never draw the money; and he, with all his pride, was driven by dire necessity to make use of it himself.

So long as this money lasted Otis gave himself a treat of idleness. But "time hung heavy on his hands." Honoria always received him gravely, as if she thought it was not just right for him to seek her society; and thus he was driven, more and more, to think of that lovely, pure face he had seen bending over the piano, while the echo of that passionate, sweet voice lingered in his memory.

In the mean time Mildred found a warm welcome in Pentacket. The Fletchers were delighted to have her with them; while her tasteful accomplishments were in constant requisition, for there was to be, on the first of October, in that old homestead, one of the grandest weddings ever celebrated in that part of the country.

Ruth, now that her mind was at ease, had recovered her health and appetite, and was daily getting back more fully the dimples and the roses which had once made her so very, very pretty. She was the happiest girl in the State; but not more happy than her lover, who was being repaid in a double measure of joy for all he had wrongfully suffered.

Little Mildred was consulted at every step of the preparations, and always appeared cheerful and interested. If she shed tears she shed them in solitude.

About three weeks before the wedding she received by mail a bulky package. Opening it in some consternation she was astonished to find that it contained a deed of gift of half the Garner estate—amounting to a round million—to Mrs. Mildred Garner from Honoria Appleton. She had no idea of accepting this magnificent gift, but was too busy to decide what to do about it just then, laying it away in a locked box, and really thinking very little about the preposterous thing.

The first of October soon came round—a gorgeous day, that shone down like a benediction on the roomy old house, every corner of which had been put in order, since many guests were expected during the day, and to remain over night, besides the many invited to the evening festivities.

The best room had been reserved for Miss Appleton, who had accepted her invitation. Mrs. Fletcher was a little flurried at the idea of so grand a guest, but Mildred laughed at her, and declared she would take all the care of the lady, and, since the house was crowded, share her room with her.

The house was sweet with flowers and quaintly handsome with its old-fashioned adornments. Guests poured in—Miss Appleton among them—and merry laughter, music and feasting soon brought the starry evening, when all the respectable people in Pentacket flocked to the wedding.

Ruth made a sweet, girlish, pretty bride. Her long white-silk robe, her veil, her orange-flowers, her smiles and blushes, were charming; but she had a rival in the popular interest; for no living being in that mass of friends had ever seen so lovely and sylph-like a creature as the fair girl who stood by the bride, dressed

also in white and wearing a necklace of costly pearls about her white neck, and white roses in her gold hair.

There was a faint, soft flush on Mildred's cheek, and a glory in her great violet eyes which Honoria, intently watching her, could not entirely understand.

She would have understood it had she seen the love-letter which nestled near Mildred's fast-beating heart—the first love-letter the child had ever received—and which told her that her fairy-prince was coming to claim his bride, at last.

Not a rose in the rose-gardens of Persia could have rivaled Mildred's cheeks when, just after the wedding ceremony between Ruth and Jasper, Otis Garner walked into the room and came up and gracefully congratulated them; then turned and kissed his fair little wife before them all, and, taking her on his arm, led her out to supper.

Honoria was not married for three years after that, though she had suitors by the dozen; but she did, at length, meet a true and noble gentleman, well worthy of her—far more worthy of her than Otis Garner could ever have been, though Otis, after all his foibles, makes a tender and fond husband to his little wife.

It was a sharp way of cheating old uncle Garner out of his vengeance which Honoria had taken when she divided her fortune, not with Otis, but with his wife; and she had the pleasure of seeing her cousin restored to his rights without breaking the word—though she did the spirit of that ill-tempered will.

THE END.

Half-Dime Singer's Library

- 1 WHOA, EMMA! and 59 other Songs.
- 2 CAPTAIN CUFF and 57 other Songs.
- 3 THE GAINSBORO' HAT and 62 other Songs.
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